

THE NEED FOR CLASSICAL CHRISTOLOGY IN
THE MODERN WESTERN MAINLINE
PROTESTANT CHURCH

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B.S. Leadership & Ministry, Asbury University, 2018
MDiv, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2021

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio
May 2026

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ABSTRACT

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This project addressed the problem of a reductionist view of the incarnation in the American Mainline Protestant Church through additional pastoral education in this area. This project was conducted in the First Methodist Church of Carrier Mills, Illinois. Its hypothesis was, if the professing members receive enhanced education on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, encompassing his divinity and dual natures, then they will obtain a Christological understanding more closely aligned with traditional teachings of Christology. The project was a six-week in-person small group study covering the biblical, historical, and theological foundations of classical Christology. Key findings are

that the course was moderately effective in increasing participants' knowledge of classical Christology and intimacy with Christ.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the many individuals and communities who have supported me throughout this doctoral journey.

My heartfelt thanks go to the people of First Methodist Church of Carrier Mills for hosting this project and for your faithful encouragement and hospitality. Your partnership made this work possible.

I offer special thanks to Rev. Dr. Joseph Okello, Rev. Dr. Shalom Renner, Rev. Dr. Thomas Logsdon, and Rev. Dr. Tesia Mallory. Your engagement, insight, and friendship as fellow ministers and scholars have sustained me along the way.

To my mentors, Dr. David Watson, Dr. Justus Hunter, and Bishop Michael Lowry, thank you for your unwavering guidance. Dr. Watson, your theological clarity and steady encouragement grounded this work. Dr. Hunter, your sharp intellect and love for the Church's tradition deepened my thinking. Bishop Lowry, your bold vision and pastoral leadership challenged and inspired me to lead with purpose.

I am especially thankful to Shaye Stone, who served as my contextual associate with grace, attentiveness, and faithfulness. Your thoughtful feedback, steady encouragement, and shared passion for meaningful worship leadership helped shape this project in vital ways. Your partnership was a gift, and I am grateful for the wisdom and friendship you brought to the process.

This work reflects not only my efforts but the grace of God and the generosity of many. Thank you all. Soli Deo Gloria.

DEDICATION

To my children: Katelyn, Jonathan, Elizabeth, Rebecca, and Andrew. This project is dedicated to you.

Its focus is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God made flesh, who came to dwell among us not in power or prestige, but in humility, vulnerability, and love. This mystery has been the heart of my study and reflection, and it is also the heart of what I pray for each of you: that you would come to know and trust the One who is truly Emmanuel, God with us.

Throughout this journey, there were long hours of studying, writing, and ministry preparation, many of which kept me from being with you. You have sacrificed more than you should have had to, and yet you have shown me grace, patience, and love far beyond your years.

Thank you for walking this road with me in your own way. Your lives are my greatest joy and most meaningful calling. I pray that this work, and the life I live alongside it, always points you toward Christ.

With all my love,

Dad

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

—John 1:14 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century Mainline Protestant Church in America faces a theological crisis of identity, coherence, and Christological fidelity. At the center of this crisis is a reductionist tendency that undermines the historic doctrine of the Incarnation, a central pillar of Classical Christology. This reductionism manifests not only in theological discourse but also in liturgical life, discipleship, and congregational understanding, leading to a diminished witness of the Church's proclamation that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). A Christianity that no longer confesses the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, or one that hesitates to affirm the ontological reality of the Incarnation, inevitably drifts toward moralistic therapeutic deism, a belief system that is aesthetically Christian but doctrinally vacuous.¹

This project emerged from a dual concern: first, that many Mainline Protestant clergy and laity no longer possess an operative understanding of the Incarnation grounded in classical Christological formulations; and second, that this deficiency is leading to serious theological distortions and a weakened ecclesial identity. The erosion of orthodox Christology is not simply a matter of academic debate; it has practical and spiritual consequences for the life of the church. A reduced Christ yields a diminished gospel, and a diminished gospel cannot sustain the Church's mission in the world. As Athanasius

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-171.

argued in *De incarnatione*, the Word took on flesh not as an abstract symbol but as the essential act by which God restored creation and reconciled humanity to Himself. The modern Church forgets this at its peril.

The need for a renewed embrace of classical Christology, anchored in the creedal affirmation of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451), is urgent. The modern Church must recover the theological clarity and spiritual power of these ecumenical confessions, not as relics of a bygone era, but as essential to its mission and integrity today. This project aimed to explore the educational and pastoral strategies necessary to reintroduce classical Christological teachings to the American Mainline Protestant context. In particular, it evaluates the hypothesis that adult learners, clergy and laity alike, can attain a more theologically robust understanding of the Incarnation through targeted formation programs rooted in Scripture, historical theology, and sacramental practice.

This task was not merely a matter of intellectual restitution but one of ecclesial vitality. Classical Christology is not ancillary to the life of the Church; it is its beating heart. The claim that Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human is not just a dogmatic assertion but the very grammar of Christian faith and worship. As such, it ought to be the foundational lens through which Scripture is read, the sacraments are celebrated, and discipleship is formed. Yet in much of contemporary Mainline Protestantism, the Incarnation is treated either as an optional mystery for the theological elite or reduced to vague moral example. This eclipse of the Incarnation betrays not only a doctrinal amnesia but a pastoral negligence that deprives the Church of its deepest resources for worship, formation, and mission.

A revival of classical Christology must therefore begin in the concrete practices of the local church, particularly in its worship and teaching. As this project argued, worship is the locus where theological truth becomes embodied, where doctrine meets doxology. Through Word and Sacrament, the Church does not merely speak about Christ, it encounters Him. The Eucharist in particular stands as a living witness to the truth that God has entered human history in flesh and blood. Without the Incarnation, the sacraments lose their power to mediate divine grace; they become empty rituals rather than encounters with the living Christ. Conversely, a robust sacramental theology grounded in the Incarnation can revitalize Christian formation, drawing believers into deeper communion with the Triune God.

This project was not an exercise in nostalgia for the doctrinal formulations of a previous era. Rather, it was a call to theological and pastoral responsibility. Classical Christology must be retrieved not only for the sake of doctrinal accuracy but for the flourishing of the Church's witness in a post-Christian age. The erosion of orthodox Christology is not neutral; it is a form of ecclesial disintegration. When Christ is reduced, the Church is reduced. When the Incarnation is marginalized, discipleship becomes moralistic rather than transformative. Therefore, to recover the classical Christology is to recover the very identity and mission of the Church.

This work was grounded in a specific context: First Methodist Church of Carrier Mills, Illinois, a congregation formerly affiliated with the United Methodist Church and now part of the Global Methodist Church. Theologically rooted and pastorally engaged, this church provided an ideal setting for a six-week educational intervention aimed at exploring whether a renewed understanding of the Incarnation can reshape theological

consciousness and pastoral practice. Using a mix of biblical exegesis, historical theology (especially the thoughts of Athanasius), and theological reflection, this study investigated how classical Christology could be meaningfully taught and embodied in contemporary congregational life.

The structure of the project reflected this multifaceted aim. The first chapter lays the theological and ministerial groundwork for the problem, demonstrating the widespread reductionism concerning the Incarnation. The second chapter turned to the biblical foundations, with a detailed exegesis of John 1:14 as the central text through which the mystery of the Incarnation was unveiled. The third chapter draws on historical theology, especially the witness of Athanasius, to clarify how early Christian doctrine developed to guard the full humanity and divinity of Christ. The fourth examines pedagogical strategies and adult learning theories to implement this theological content in a church setting. Finally, the project analysis evaluates the results of the educational intervention, seeking to determine whether the participants' Christological understanding became more aligned with the orthodox tradition.

At its core, this project was a plea for the Church to return to the center - to Christ, who is the Word made flesh. The Incarnation is not a theological curiosity but the key to understanding everything: God, humanity, salvation, worship, Scripture, and even the Church itself. The Chalcedonian Definition's paradoxical confession, "truly God and truly man," must not be relegated to theological textbooks; it must become the heartbeat of ecclesial life. Only then can the Church truly be the Body of Christ in the world, bearing witness to the One who took on our flesh so that we might share in His life.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

This project addressed the problem of a reductionist view of the incarnation in the American Mainline Protestant Church through additional pastoral education in this area. By emphasizing the theological richness of the incarnation, the project sought to reframe pastoral teaching to highlight the full humanity and divinity of Christ as central to the gospel message. This initiative also explored how a robust understanding of the incarnation shaped ethical practices and deepened spiritual formation within congregational life.

In this chapter, I will address the context and combat a reduced view of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the American Mainline Protestant Church. A reduced view of the incarnation can be defined as a “lessening” of Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ isn’t God incarnate than many other things can be viewed as equal or greater than Jesus. I will begin with a definition of what the incarnation of Jesus Christ is. I will then show evidence that the incarnation is being viewed in a reduced way in the church. Next, I will present the context in which I addressed this issue in my project. Following this, I will give an autobiographical account of why this issue is important and relevant to me. I will then show an interrelationship of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the Sacraments. Finally, I will present a conclusion.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ can be defined as the event in which God became flesh and assumed a human nature and became human as Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ should be understood to be fully God and fully man, the second person of the Trinity, in the flesh with us as God.

The omissions of teaching and understanding the incarnation of Jesus Christ have significant consequences for the progress of authentic Christianity. Many of these omissions can be attributed to religious institutions' persons being influenced by the world in the same way as political, social, commercial, and industrial institution are influenced. Social pressures also affect the clergy, who should be defenders of the historic faith. Many parishioners of these churches have seen the light that Christianity offers. Still, since the whole truth of the authentic orthodox faith, and the importance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, has not been taught to many American Mainline Protestant parishioners, they are blinded by ignorance brought about by the sin of omission of clergy and institution.

“In the case of worship, the overemphasis on the rational side of man in worship was first advocated by the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli.”¹ Others, such as Abraham Kuyper, have argued that “our intellectual, ethical, religious, and aesthetic life each commands a sphere of its own.”² This context breeds a context in which the reduction of theology to a rational argument is not only condoned, but, in many cases, celebrated. It is my belief that what is needed to address reductionist views is a “grounded subjectivity, a

¹ Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: The Call to an Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 121.

² Webber, *Common Roots*, 7.

subjectivity anchored in the revelatory experience of the early Christians.”³ A view that is centered around the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

To move beyond these theological and ethical errors, there must be a rediscovery of the true nature of the historical church. “Any long-range renewal of the evangelical church must take evangelicals beyond the purely practical questions into the more difficult theological issues.”⁴

My interest in presenting the historic faith, orthodox beliefs, and passion for the study and teaching systems of theology relate to the need in this area of ministry. Through opportunities given to teach others more about the importance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, American Mainline Protestant churches can be better educated in the importance of this vital piece of divine significance. I formulated a short-term class in which I taught American Mainline Protestant parishioners about the incarnation of Jesus Christ using the views and theology of the early church fathers, such as Athanasius, and scriptural support for this belief, such as John 1:14, as the foundation for my argument. At the beginning and end of the class I had the participants fill out an essay about their beliefs of the importance of the incarnation based on the scripture of John 1:14 which states “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The successes of this project were measured by how many participating individuals showed a shift in their beliefs from a reduced to a more complete view of the importance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

³ Webber, *Common Roots*, 7.

⁴ Webber, *Common Roots*, 96.

My context was First Methodist Church of Carrier Mills, Illinois. My problem statement was that the American Mainline Protestant church has a reduced view of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which is leading to misfocus within the greater church, such as the presence of moralistic therapeutic deisms.

Through the process of reductionism, it is possible to outline eight metaphysical models of the incarnation that explain Christ's humanity and divinity in a way that unites the three concrete objects God the Son, a human body, and a human soul without falling into heresy. These models fall into two broad categories: materialist Christologies and dualist Christologies.⁵ There appears to be three key issues of a reductionist ontology: materialism, mind-body interaction, and heresy. The incarnation asks believers to understand that an immaterial object becomes a material object. The Incarnate Son of God must be both fully human and fully divine, with two natures that are distinct enough to be separate, but not so separated that Jesus becomes two persons in one body. In trying to understand the incarnation within a reductionist classical framework, it becomes very difficult to resolve these problems within the hypostatic union.

The difficulty of having a clear understanding of the importance and function of the incarnation is having profound effects within the modern church. In a recent poll Barna group found that “among 16- to 29-year-olds shows that a new generation is more skeptical of and resistant to Christianity than were people of the same age just a decade ago.”⁶ Interestingly, the lack of the incarnation being expressed shows itself clearly later

⁵ Brian Leftow, “The Humanity of God,” in *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20-44.

⁶ Barna Group, “A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity,” Barna, March 9, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity/>.

in this article in which Barna finds: “When young people were asked to identify their impression of Christianity, one of the common themes was “Christianity has changed from what it used to be” today’s society no longer looks like Jesus.”⁷ Individuals, especially young people can tell that something is missing, and that something that is missing is Jesus. Within the interview that the Barna group conducted they “kept encountering young people – both those inside the church and outside of it – who said that something was broken in the present-day expression of Christianity.”⁸

The brokenness of the modern church, with its reduced view of the incarnation, can be seen in church attendance. “In actual numbers, 36 percent fewer Americans attended church weekly in 2020 than in 1993.”⁹ This does not correlate with personal spiritual practices such as bible reading and prayer. While church attendance is on a sharp decline bible reading and prayer remain constant. “The share of Americans who read the Bible at least several times a week has not changed significantly since 2011.”¹⁰ Prayer also remains consistent. “Large majorities of Americans still say that prayer is something that they do on a weekly basis.”¹¹

I hypothesize that a reductionist account, therefore, leaves one with some seemingly insurmountable obstacles to forming a coherent account of the incarnation, and also leads to an overall dismissal of the incarnation in its entirety. Why attend church if

⁷ Barna Group, “A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism.”

⁸ Barna Group, “A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism.”

⁹ Barna Group, “The Changing State of the Church,” Barna, July 8, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

¹⁰ Barna Group, “The Changing State of the Church.”

¹¹ Barna Group, “The Changing State of the Church.”

the church no longer believers in the Jesus it serves? Or if Jesus is not divine, why worship at all? To address this, I believe that more focused lesson on the importance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, such as the one I gave within my defined context, should be implemented to the greater American Mainline Protestant church. It is my belief that if such projects are implemented on a wider scale, fewer American Mainline Protestants would have a reduced view of the incarnation. My methodology included a class given to show the importance of the incarnation in relation to all other areas of the Christian faith. My results, as expected, were that once American Mainline Protestant individuals are given the opportunity to dive deeper into the importance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, fewer individuals dismissed the importance of it and carried a less reduced view than they had been operating with. At the beginning and end of this class I had the participants fill out an essay about their beliefs of the importance of the incarnation based on the scripture of John 1:14. The success of the project was measured by how many individuals showed a shift in their beliefs from a more reductionist view to an orthodox understanding of the incarnation.

Autobiography

I want to reaffirm teaching the entirety of the person, where they are at, and in their condition; this is what made all of the difference in the world to me. People are not able to be taught in a cookie-cutter environment. Everybody learns differently due to life's context. I enjoy self-enabled discovery; I like a variety of instructional methods and tackle problems by looking for patterns and scanning possibilities. The actual teaching of Christianity by the church in the process of learning the most meaningful worship and

teaching that Christians can do with others in their communities occurs every moment of their lives as we go about our daily routines and business, not just during an hour on Sundays. After all, the positive and negative things we encounter shape us and instinctively affect how we respond to a similar response or situation in our lives in the future. As a Global Methodist, I have always appreciated our denomination's methodology. John Wesley states that our faith is based upon Scripture, experience, tradition, and reason. Every moment of our lives, we experience things. Good or bad, these things shape us and help us learn what to do the next time we experience something similar. I'm personally glad that being a part of a church that showed the good in every moment every day influenced me to practice my life in this way and now lead others by their example in my life.

A ministry nuance has evolved my desire to become more and more instructional with my messages. I flourish in the academy setting and seek to bring a small piece of that to the congregations that I serve. I believe that much of our church, and the world in general, has lost or been misguided in understanding what it truly means to be a Christian. I feel passionate about addressing what I perceive to be the rampant reductionist view of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in our modern church and secular world. There are numerous manifestations of this. If Christ is less or equal to anything or anyone else, then we can no longer profess to be Christians. Christ must be at the center, or the religion in which we are worshipping is a religion of personal preferences rather than of worshipping Christ. So, I intentionally teach in this area and magnify the incarnation through the sacrament of Holy Communion. I feel a sense of urgency to

accomplish this in my ministry as I see the church, especially in North American, continue to fall further away from its core and decline away at an exponential rate.

In my faith journey, I have become a Benedictine Oblate of Saint Meinrad Archabbey in Saint Meinrad, Indiana. My oblation was formed from a desire to seek God with the help of the Rule of Saint Benedict and to establish a solid spiritual home with the monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey during the itinerant ministry of being a Methodist Pastor. The Rule of Saint Benedict has influence my life and spirituality by its three central premises. First of all, Stability of Heart, Oblates commit themselves to the monastic family they are joining. It's because of my commitment and perseverance, my stability of heart, that I shall be saved. It is my free choice to associate with the values of the Benedictine life, i.e., constant striving to respond to God's call, poverty of spirit, and obedience to the movements of the Holy Spirit. These values make the stability of the heart possible. These sense of purpose, guided meaning in life, is the first fruit of stability. The second, Fidelity to the Spirit of the Monastic Life, is when I strive for proper balance in the elements of my spiritual life and therefore I make progress in my fidelity to the spirit of the monastic life. As an oblate, I must adapt the values of the Rule to the particular circumstances of my daily life. Duties to family, work, church, and social obligations cannot and should not be forgotten. Instead, they should be undertaken as works of love done in the spirit of the Rule. Third, Obedience to the Will of God, or active listening, is not a project I take up. Instead, it is a way of being in the world. God's will is not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be lived. For the Benedictine monk, nun, or oblate, listening and living are achieved through an attitude of contemplation.

Contemplation is nothing more and nothing less than listening with the ear of the heart to the joy of discovering God in every aspect of our lives.

Becoming a Benedictine oblate has also established five duties that have enhanced my personal spiritual life and been vital for my ministry as a Global Methodist Pastor. First, Liturgy of the Hours, I will pray daily. With the second duty, Rule of St. Benedict, I read from the Rule of Saint Benedict each day. Saint Benedict, in the Rule, lays down the basic Gospel teachings to follow to learn the love of Christ. In a year, I try to read the Rule three times. Third, Lectio Divina, I practice daily meditative, holy reading from the scriptures. With the fourth, Sacraments, I participate fully in the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist; as the Eucharist is a significant focus of my faith journey. Fifth is the presence of God, and there I am attentive to God's presence in ordinary, daily life. The presence of God works two ways in my life: me seeking God, but also God seeking me.

Through my personal beliefs and faith and the Rule of Saint Benedict, I approach the world differently. I tend to be more aware of silence, and Christ's presence in it through the daily divine. I am conscious of doing my best at completing my daily duties to the best of my ability. I value simplicity, if, through the incarnation, Christ is more, then I can be less and need less. I facilitate moments of solitude for reading and prayer. I am aware of the human pull toward possession. I focus on maintaining control over bodily appetites and self-centeredness. I strive for mutual obedience in life, not only to God but also to others. I find myself gaining humility, respect for others, and seeking spiritual help. I attempt to be open to the possibility that anyone may reveal wisdom at any time. I value stability, commitment, and surrender to God in a particular place, with

specific people, and using a particular practice. And I always search for God alone through everyone and everything.

It is my personal belief that the Holy Spirit presents Himself to us in various ways to make the Incarnate Christ and what he has done and is doing for us evident. Most often, the Spirit shows Himself to us through the hands and feet of another believer. The evidence of the Spirit's presence in the Spiritual Gifts and Fruits are shown during said relationships and experiences. These fruits of the Spirit are qualities of Jesus Christ's character that emerge and continually increase in the life of a person whose heart is devoted and submitted to Jesus Christ. They are qualities such as love, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that reflect what Jesus is like (*allos parakletos*). This influence of understanding, love, and presence is possible because of Christ alone, through his incarnation, and has stayed with me over the years and has had a powerful impact on serving as a pastor.

In combating a reductionist view of the incarnation, we must understand that “much of American evangelical history is bound up with revivalism, which focuses on individual conversion and personal holiness while playing down the importance of doctrinal teaching or well-ordered common worship.”¹² This has created an environment of both liberal and revivalist subjectivism in the evangelical church.

Scripture itself is grounded in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, thus, the inauguration of the renewal of all creation is achieved by the understanding that “the

¹² Webber, *Common Roots*, 6.

incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection is the center point of divine history and therefore the key to the imaginative and visual reading of Scripture.”¹³

What is needed in this context, then, is a balanced theology that “affirms the many parts of Christian teaching in such a way that each facet of truth is taught in a balanced relation to the whole; a theology with perspective sees Christian truth in relation to history.”¹⁴ Failing to do this results in overemphasis in some areas of theology and a reduction in the balance of the whole.

“The incarnational nature of early Christian worship points to the mystery of God’s plan of salvation known through signs and symbols in the Scripture and enfleshed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the chief mystery of the church.”¹⁵ All worship, both contained in the Old Testament and the New Testament, points to the incarnation worshipping God through Jesus Christ. The incarnational nature of the worship of the historic Christian church is rooted in Jewish thought. Frank Gavin states, “A sound Christian definition of sacrament (incarnation) proceeds from the characteristically Jewish premise that the material world is not evil, but good – since God made it and saw it to be good.”¹⁶ This reality ties creation, incarnation, and the church together intimately as well. God is at work within His creation.

Christian theology stands in direct line with the Hebrew conception of wholeness and coinherence in her theology of the incarnation, that God became man; her

¹³ Webber, *Common Roots*, 25.

¹⁴ Webber, *Common Roots*, 11.

¹⁵ Webber, *Common Roots*, 15.

¹⁶ Webber, *Common Roots*, 115.

Christology, that the human and divine exist together in a single person; her ecclesiology, that the church is both divine and human; and her understanding of Scripture, the human is divinely inspired, as well as other doctrines that can be understood through this incarnational model.¹⁷ I believe that focusing on and addressing the sacraments will play a critical role in addressing a reduced view of the incarnation. The sacraments played a crucial role in the revelatory experience of the early church and its real nature. Johann Sebastian Drey, German Catholic professor of theology at the University of Tübingen, believed that “the incarnation is the fundamental mystery of the Christian faith, the Grundgeheimniß.”¹⁸ His belief was that the entire liturgy is aimed at making the Christ-event of the past present as possible for believers.

It is through the fundamental mystery of the incarnation that Drey, and Christian theology in general, analogically tries to understand the relation between outer and inner, body and spirit, spiritual and sensual. For Drey, the incarnation shows how intimately essential and non-essentials, outer and inner, human and divine can be connected to each other in liturgy. By drawing this clear parallel between the incarnation and what is taking place in the liturgy, Drey Christologically frames his entire liturgical theory. It is, above all else, the incarnation which is being made “permanent, continuously working, ever present and real” in the liturgy. As such, the incarnation functions not only as a model to

¹⁷ Webber, *Common Roots*, 115.

¹⁸ Samuel Goyvaerts, “The Incarnation as the Fundamental Mystery for Sacramentality in the Catholic Tübingen School,” *Studia Liturgica* 50, no. 2 (September 2020): 176–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0039320720945938>.

understand the sacraments and the liturgy, but as its ontological foundation. At its very core, the liturgy follows an incarnational logic.¹⁹

Drey was not alone in this belief. Other earlier church theologians such as Thomas Aquinas also considered the incarnated Word as the significant cause of the sacraments.²⁰ The sacraments helped shape this historic faith of Christianity and are the usual tools to assist in combating analytical reductions of the faith, in this instance, that of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The outward signs that the sacraments present reveal a deeper dimension of the Christian faith. “Our faith is not an isolated, one-dimensional experience that only impacts our hearts, souls, or minds.”²¹ There is a rediscovery and recapturing of historical-theological understandings of the mystical union between Jesus Christ and the church. “This unity is expressed in a common creedal confession, a common ministry passed down by the laying on of hands, a common worship in the single loaf and cup, and a common mission in the world.”²²

The sacraments are fundamental in the church’s life. They cannot be objects of human creation or action but rather divine acts in which humanity is invited to join and participate in. They do not belong to the church but are contained within the church. These are not private or individual acts, as they are communal in nature and design. The sacraments and the liturgies associated in addition to that involve active participation. “The participatory nature of liturgical worship involves innumerable expressions that

¹⁹ Samuel Goyvaerts, “Incarnation as Fundamental Mystery,” 179.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Tertia Pars, Q. 62, Art. 5, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Christian Classical Ethereal Library, accessed October 24, 2004, <https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/TP/TP062.html#TPQ62A5THEP1>.

²¹ Winfield Bevins, *Ever Ancient, Ever New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 40.

²² Webber, *Common Roots*, 81.

invite us to engage our entire bodies in different movements and posturing.”²³ “Creation. Incarnation. Church. The church takes water, wine, and bread – the very stuff of life, through actions ordained by Christ – sanctifies them (by Word and by the Spirit) so that they might be drawn into fellowship with the Triune God.”²⁴ The focal point of the sacrament and the worship liturgies associated with addition to that is Jesus Christ.

In the sacrament of Holy Communion, the symbols of bread and wine act as material objects that are directly connected through a holy mystery to Jesus Christ. The sacrament of Holy Communion is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather is a sacrament to our redemption by Christ’s death; insomuch that, to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ.²⁵

Then, participating in the sacraments invites American Mainline Protestants to point toward Jesus and not toward individualism. The sacraments’ historical beliefs and liturgies connect the church with its past and the reality of its present and future in relationship with God who created it and its savior Jesus Christ. Each time the sacraments occur, historical faith is restated, practiced, and internalized by the clergy and the laity participating in worship. In and through the sacraments, Jesus Christ is glorified. Christ is not worthy to be praised if the incarnation is not acknowledged and celebrated. This

²³ Bevens, *Ever Ancient, Ever New*, 53.

²⁴ Gordon T. Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, And Pentecostal*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 80.

²⁵ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶104, 70.

continual celebration through historic liturgy, when practiced by clergy and laity alike, is a divine sacramental act that helps alleviate the issue of a reduced view of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Thus, “A sacramental understanding of worship is grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation.”²⁶ Christ came in the flesh fully God, yet fully human. Athanasius and Irenaeus understood that Jesus’ coming into humankind’s flesh elevated the flesh and provided the medium for divine self-disclosure. The sacraments, Holy Eucharist and Baptism, are conduits of the presence of the divinity of God.

Conclusion

The principle place to combat the reductionist view of the Incarnation in American Mainline Protestants is in worship. The sacraments bring Christ to us in a tangible way. Where Christ is the center of focus the incarnation can be made evident.

“The incarnation is the ultimate expression of the revelation of God through creation, by which God assumed humanity in all its physicality.”²⁷ God has come to humanity directly in the flesh; therefore, Incarnation is how God is known. Suppose we want to be in a relationship with God. In that case, American Mainline Protestants cannot discount the connectedness or the divinity of all three persons of the Trinity. American Mainline Protestants must be in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Through the divine Incarnation of Jesus, the Christian, through the sacraments, connects with Christ and the church. The church is an extension of the presence of Jesus within the created world. Christ and the church are inseparable; thus, the church and the Incarnation are intimate.

²⁶ Webber, *Common Roots*, 24.

²⁷ Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental*, 79.

Through the sacraments, and the power of the Incarnation that has taken place within the creation that God has made Christians participate in the life of Christ through their engagement with the church. The church then is a tangible witness of a symbol of the Incarnation and a risen Christ who lives on earth and serves as a witness to the ascended Messiah.

Gordon T. Smith, president of Ambrose University and Seminary in Calgary, Alberta, where he also serves as Professor of Systematic and Spiritual Theology, observed that “Evangelical church leaders and pastors are typically very keen to affirm the need for discipleship, spiritual growth, and transformation.”²⁸ But one cannot be connected to God by Christ through the Holy Spirit unless one acknowledges the full enormity of the Incarnation doctrine and gives it proper respect in life and worship. Word and Table form us; discounting the Incarnation that brings the Christian leads to little, if any, spiritual formation.

Therefore, the principle place to combat a reductionist view of the Incarnation in American Mainline Protestants is in worship. Worship is the natural space where doctrine meets life, where theology transforms from abstract concepts to lived experience. The sacraments bring Christ to us in a tangible way. They are not merely symbolic rituals but are instead profound encounters with the mystery of the Incarnation. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper serve as visible signs of an invisible grace, a means by which the believer is united with Christ in His death, resurrection, and ongoing life. Where Christ is the center of focus, the incarnation can be made evident, anchoring the church in the reality of a God who entered human history in flesh and blood.

²⁸ Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental*, 83.

Pope John Paul II states in his encyclical letter *Faith and Reason*:

In the Incarnation of the Son of God we see forged the enduring and definitive synthesis which the human mind of itself could not even have imagined: the Eternal enters time, the Whole lies hidden in the part, God takes on a human face. The truth communicated in Christ's Revelation is therefore no longer confined to a particular place or culture, but is offered to every man and woman who would welcome it as the word which is the absolutely valid source of meaning for human life.²⁹

This investment is not simply a historical event but a continuing reality in the life of the church. The Incarnation bridges the gap between heaven and earth, and worship provides the space for the bridge to be crossed. Without proper acknowledgement of this truth, worship risks becoming hollow, focused on personal experience or emotion rather than the transformative presence of Christ. Thus, American Mainline Protestant worship must recover its focus on the Incarnation, embracing the mystery of a God who became man to dwell among us.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of the revelation of God through creation, by which God assumed humanity in all its physicality. This truth reminds us that God's work is not confined to the spiritual realm but extends to all of His creation. The Incarnation affirms the goodness of the material world, demonstrating that God works through it to reveal Himself. When the Word became flesh, the divine and human were united, showing that salvation is holistic, encompassing body, mind, and spirit. To deny or minimize the Incarnation is to misunderstand the very nature of God's

²⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Newark, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 207, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=7104159>.

redemptive work. God has come to humanity directly in the flesh; therefore, Incarnation is how God is known.³⁰

American Mainline Protestants cannot discount the connectedness or the divinity of all three persons of the Trinity if they wish to be in a relationship with God. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from the doctrine of the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, who is conceived by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit continues the work of Christ in the world today. This relational dynamic reveals that God's essence is love, a love that overflows into creation and reaches its climax in the person of Jesus Christ. This relationship is not a mere intellectual assent to theological truths but a living, active communion with the One who took on human form.

In conclusion, the doctrine of the Incarnation is foundational to understanding the Christian faith, particularly in its expression within American Mainline Protestantism. The Incarnation is not merely a theological abstraction but a tangible and transformative reality that shapes how believers engage with God, the church, and the world. The presence of Christ in the flesh bridges the divine and human, offering a means of connection and intimacy with the Creator. For American Mainline Protestants, the significance of the Incarnation must be preserved and emphasized, especially in the context of worship and the sacraments, which provide the means by which Christ becomes present and accessible to believers. In this way, the church serves as an extension of Christ's ongoing presence, offering a living witness to the Incarnation's implications for both the individual and the community.

³⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 251-268.

Furthermore, a proper understanding of the Incarnation invites a deeper engagement with Christian formation, emphasizing the need for holistic discipleship. Discipleship cannot be fully realized without acknowledging the profound mystery of the Incarnation, which calls Christians to participate in the life of Christ and, through the church, to embody His presence in the world. The sacraments, particularly Word and Table, serve as essential instruments in this process, shaping the believer's identity and guiding them toward spiritual transformation. As such, neglecting the significance of the Incarnation results in a truncated spirituality that fails to fully form the believer in Christ's image. Therefore, the task before American Mainline Protestantism is to renew its commitment to the Incarnation as a central tenet of faith, ensuring that worship, theology, and practice reflect the full scope of God's engagement with humanity.

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CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter explores the foundational passage in John 1:14 to establish a robust classical Christological framework. Beginning with an analysis of the contemporary challenge posed by a low Christological view prevalent in the American Mainline Protestant Church¹, the paper delves into an exegetical study of John 1:14 within the broader context of the Gospel of John. Through examining the text, theological implications, historical background, and scholarly debates, this paper argues for a firm stance on classical Christology, emphasizing the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ as articulated in the prologue of the Gospel of John. This paper concludes with a summary highlighting the significance of embracing classical Christology in contemporary theological discourse.

In approaching this text, I acknowledge that my reading is shaped by a canonical and theological framework that engages both Scripture and the broader tradition of the Church. This approach entails interpreting the passage not only within the context of the biblical canon but also through the lens of the church's historical doctrinal development, particularly as articulated at Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon. The affirmation of

¹ Roger Wolsey, "Jesus is Not God: A Comparison of John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1," *Patheos*, December 29, 2014. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerwolsey/2014/12/jesus-is-not-god-a-comparison-of-john-11-and-1-john-11/>.

the Son's co-eternality with the Father and the dual nature of Christ, fully divine and fully human, were not universally accepted in the early centuries of the Church. These doctrines, while rooted in apostolic teaching, were the subject of intense theological debate, leading to the formulation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon. These creeds represent the Church's effort to safeguard the mystery of the Incarnation and the nature of Christ against heretical interpretations. Therefore, in my reading this text theologically, I do so in dialogue with the Great Tradition, acknowledging that my interpretation is indebted to these ecumenical councils and the creedal formulations that have shaped orthodox Christian thought.

Introduction

The contemporary American Mainline Protestant Church faces a significant challenge with the rise of a low Christological view, which undermines the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. This project seeks to address this theological issue by reinforcing a classical Christological framework, mainly focusing on the Incarnation as articulated in John 1:14. The need for clarity and depth in Adult Christian Education programs around this doctrine is urgent, as the Incarnation is central to the Christian faith, affecting both orthodoxy (belief) and orthopraxy (practice).

At the heart of this challenge is the tendency to take a diminished view of Christ's divinity, akin to ancient heresies like Arianism, which denied the eternal pre-existence of the Son of God.² Statements by contemporary church leaders, such as Rev. Roger Wolsey

² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Newark, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016), 110-112, accessed September 14, 2024, <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=7104159>.

of the United Methodist Church, who suggested, “I don’t believe that [Jesus is] literally God (at least not what most people tend to mean by that word)³, exemplify the drift toward a low Christology. This study counters such views by emphasizing the full weight of biblical revelation, particularly the profound meaning of John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”⁴

The Christian faith is unique in its proclamation of Jesus Christ, who was incarnated and crucified– the Word made flesh. As Alister McGrath argues in his “Christian Theology,” Christ fulfills the theological roles of revelation, salvation, and modeling the redeemed life⁵. Each of these functions requires a recognition of Christ as both fully human and fully divine. Without this understanding, heretical views that dilute the Incarnation, such as Arianism or Ebionitism, tend to proliferate. These views challenge the divine origin of Jesus and undermine the core doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the virgin birth, Jesus’ pre-existence, and his sinless nature.⁶

John 1:14 speaks directly against such reductions, affirming that the eternal Word, who was with God and was God, entered history in the person of Jesus Christ.⁷ The text challenges low Christology by asserting the divine glory accompanying the Incarnation.

³ Wolsey, “Jesus is Not God.”

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII* (New Haven & London, UK: Yale University Press, 2021),- 30–34. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261967>.

⁵ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 125-128.

⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004) 45–47.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, George Raymond Beasley-Murray, Rupert William Noel Hoare and John Kenneth Riches, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 28-31, accessed September 14, 2024, <https://archive.org/details/gospelofjohnco00bult>.

This incarnational mystery – God becoming flesh – is central to Christian orthodoxy. To deny Christ's full divinity and humanity, as some contemporary views do, is to question the very nature of the Gospel and the authority of Scripture.⁸

The Incarnation is not merely a symbolic or secondary event but a new creation. This divine act reshapes humanity's relationship with God. Suppose Jesus is indeed the Word made flesh. In that case, the Incarnation is essential to the Christian understanding of salvation and divine revelation.⁹ This study, rooted in John 1:14, will explore how a proper Christological perspective is vital for maintaining the integrity of Christian doctrine and the faithful practice of discipleship in the modern church. Through a more profound exegesis of this verse, we will demonstrate why a high Christological view is indispensable for a robust and orthodox faith.

Exegesis of John 1:14

In the Gospel of John, particularly chapters 1-12, a recurring theme is the presentation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the incarnate Word. The opening of John's Gospel is unique in that it starts with a poetic prologue (John 1:1-18), which contrasts with the more historical or narrative introductions found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).¹⁰ This prologue sets the theological foundation for

⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England, and Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press and W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 100-103.

⁹ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 35-38, accessed September 14, 2024, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlab&AN=1234926>.

¹⁰ Köstenberger, *John*, 35-38.

the Gospel by establishing the pre-existence of the Logos, or the Word, which becomes flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:14).¹¹

John's presentation of the Logos focuses on Jesus' divine nature. In John 1:1, we are introduced to the Word, which "was with God" and "was God." This reflects a cosmic understanding of Christ, who existed before time and creation.¹² The notion of the Logos is not just a philosophical abstraction but the personal, divine agent through whom all things were made (John 1:3).¹³ This eternal Logos is then identified as Jesus in verse 14, when the Word became flesh and "dwelt among us" (John 1:14).¹⁴ This marks a pivotal moment, as the eternal and divine becomes incarnate, entering human history to reveal the glory and grace of God.¹⁵

John 1:14 is located within the context of the prologue (John 1:1-18), which functions as an introduction to the Gospel and as a theological statement regarding the identity of Jesus. This passage contrasts significantly with the introductions in the other Gospels. Mark begins with the testimony of John the Baptist, focusing immediately on Jesus' adult ministry (Mark 1:1-8), while Matthew opens with a genealogy and Luke open with the narratives of John the Baptist, both surrounding Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:18-24, Luke 1:4-2:20).¹⁶ However, John's Gospel does not start with the earthly origins

¹¹ Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 28-31.

¹² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 100-103.

¹³ Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 35-38.

¹⁴ McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 110-112.

¹⁵ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 84-86, accessed September 14, 2024, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10492569>.

¹⁶ Wolsey, *Jesus is Not God: A Comparison of John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1*.

of Jesus but with the eternal existence of the Logos, situating Jesus within the divine narrative from the beginning.¹⁷

The poetic structure of John 1:1-18 helps reinforce the theological depth of John's Christology. The prologue's hymn-like form presents three related statements, building upon each other to emphasize the cosmic, eternal, and incarnational aspects of Christ's nature. First, it addresses the Word's relationship to creation and the universe (John 1:1-5).¹⁸ Then, it moves into the temporal sphere, where John the Baptist witnesses to this great light (John 1:6-8). Finally, the climactic moment comes when "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), introducing the profound mystery of the incarnation.¹⁹

The language used in John 1:14, particularly "the Word became flesh," signifies more than adopting a human form. The term "flesh" (σάρξ, *sarx*) in Greek emphasizes the full humanity of Jesus, encompassing both the physical and the vulnerable aspects of human existence²⁰. This is significant because it asserts that the divine Logos did not merely appear as human but wholly entered the human condition.²¹ The phrase "dwelt among us" (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, *eskēnōsen en hēmin*) means "pitched His tent" or "tabernacled" among humanity, which evokes the imagery of God's presence in the

¹⁷ Bultmann et al., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 28-31.

¹⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 100-103.

¹⁹ Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 28-31.

²⁰ Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 35-38.

²¹ McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 110-112.

tabernacle in the Old Testament (Exodus 25:8-9)²². This suggests that Jesus is the new locus of God's presence, fulfilling the divine promise to dwell with His people.²³

The prologue, particularly John 1:14, is crucial in establishing the authority and identity of Jesus in John's Gospel. By identifying Jesus with the Logos, John affirms that Jesus shares in God's eternal and divine nature, which is critical for understanding the high Christology that pervades the Fourth Gospel.²⁴ Unlike in the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus' identity as the Son of God unfolds progressively, John's Gospel begins with this affirmation, setting the tone for the entire narrative. Jesus is not only the Jewish Messiah but also the pre-existent, divine Son of God who brings God's wisdom and glory into the world.²⁵

Scholars have debated the origins of the prologue, with some suggesting that it may have been an existing hymn or poem about the Logos that the author of the Gospel adapted. Regardless of its origin, the prologue is vital in linking the cosmic nature of the Logos with the historical person of Jesus Christ. The shift from the poetic to the prosaic in the narrative, especially the introduction of John the Baptist in verses 6-7, connects the eternal Logos with the contingent world of first-century Palestine.²⁶ This bridging of the

²² Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964-1976), 7:591-593.

²³ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 183-185.

²⁴ Köstenberger, *John*, 35-38.

²⁵ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 100-103.

²⁶ Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 35-38.

cosmic and the historical reveals John's theological intent: to present Jesus as the eternal Word of God and the incarnate Son who enters human history to reveal God's glory.²⁷

John 1:14 is a statement of Jesus' humanity and a profound theological declaration about the incarnation. By framing Jesus as the Logos made flesh, John situates Jesus within both the divine and human spheres, emphasizing his role as the ultimate revelation of God to humanity. The prologue's focus on the Logos provides the foundation for John's Christology, which remains distinct from the Synoptic Gospels, highlighting the pre-existence, divinity, and mission of Jesus as the incarnate Word.²⁸

An Exegetical and Theological Exploration of John 1:14 within the Prologue of John's Gospel

Structure and Poetic Elegance

The Prologue of the Gospel of John is a remarkable testament to its structural elegance and profound theological depth. It opens with a majestic declaration of the eternal Word of God, existing "in the beginning" and becoming manifest in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-18)²⁹. This introduction is not merely a straightforward narrative but a meticulously crafted piece of literature, employing a poetic structure that enhances its theological significance³⁰.

²⁷ Bultmann et al., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 28-31.

²⁸ McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 100-103.

²⁹ John Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 35-40, accessed September 14, 2024, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10848746>.

³⁰ Köstenberger, *John*, 13-26.

The structure of the prologue is reminiscent of a three-line stanza, with each line building upon the previous one to form a cohesive unity of thought³¹. The first line establishes the eternal nature of the Word, emphasizing its divine origin and timeless existence³². This sets the stage for the subsequent lines, which elaborate on the Word's relationship to creation and its ultimate manifestation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.³³

Furthermore, the prologue employs parallelism and repetition to underscore its central themes. For example, the repetition of phrases such as “in the beginning” and “the Word was with God” reinforces the eternal nature of the Word and its intimate relationship with the Father.³⁴ Similarly, parallel statements, such as “the light shines in the darkness” and “the darkness has not overcome it,” emphasize the theme of divine light triumphing over darkness.³⁵

In addition to its structural elegance, the prologue introduces vital theological themes that lay the groundwork for the rest of the Gospel. These themes include the pre-existence of the Word, its role in creation, and its incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ. By presenting these theological concepts in a poetic and tightly structured form,

³¹R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), 45-47, accessed September 14, 2024, <http://books.google.com/books?id=ftYAAAAMAAJ>.

³² Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 41-51.

³³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 19-22.

³⁴ John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 960-1000, accessed October 24, 2024, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/.10269141>.

³⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 51-55.

the prologue invites readers to contemplate the profound mysteries of the divine Word and its significance for human salvation.³⁶

Theological Themes Introduced in John 1:1-18

Within the opening verses of John's Gospel, a rich tapestry of theological themes is intricately woven, providing a foundational framework for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ. At the heart of these themes lies the concept of the Word (Logos) as the divine, creative force through which all things were made and sustained.³⁷ This Word, existing eternally with God and sharing in His divine nature, is identified as the agent of creation and the source of life and light for humanity.³⁸

The prologue establishes the Word's pre-existence before the world's creation, affirming its divine nature and role in bringing forth all existence.³⁹ This theological assertion challenges any notion of Jesus as a mere human figure, emphasizing his eternal and divine identity as the Word made flesh instead.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the prologue introduces the theme of light, symbolizing divine revelation and the presence of God among His people. The imagery of light shining in the

³⁶Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 601-605.

³⁷ Gerald O'Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2000), 144-145.

³⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 121-152.

³⁹ Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 27-31.

⁴⁰ Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*, 45-49.

darkness conveys the idea of spiritual illumination and overcoming ignorance and sin through the revelation of God in Christ.⁴¹

Moreover, the prologue anticipates the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, describing how “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).⁴² This momentous event marks the culmination of God’s plan of redemption as the eternal Word takes on human form to reveal God’s love and grace in a tangible and personal way.⁴³

The Significance of John 1:14 within the Prologue

In the context of the prologue, John 1:14 occupies a central position, encapsulating the profound mystery of the Incarnation and its implications for humanity.⁴⁴ This verse is the culmination of the prologue’s theological reflection, highlighting the pivotal moment when the eternal Word takes on human flesh and enters the human experience.⁴⁵

The phrase “the Word became flesh” signifies the radical descent of the divine into the realm of human existence, as God Himself takes on the frailty and vulnerability of human flesh.⁴⁶ This condescension represents the ultimate expression of

⁴¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 67-70.

⁴² Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 3-38.

⁴³ Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 155-180.

⁴⁴Karoline M. Lewis, *John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 13-26. Accessed September 14, 2024. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10967777>.

⁴⁵Roger E. Olson, *the Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 888.

⁴⁶Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 101-105.

God's love and solidarity with humanity, as He willingly embraces the limitations and sufferings of human life.⁴⁷

Moreover, the phrase “and dwelt among us” carries rich theological significance, evoking the imagery of God's presence among His people in the tabernacle of old. Through the Incarnation, God not only dwells among His people but also pitches His tent amid human history, becoming intimately involved in the joys and struggles of human life⁴⁸. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the tabernacle functioned as a sacred space where God's glory resided and where Moses spoke to God face to face, yet it also reinforced a separation between God's holiness and humanity. Access to the divine was highly regulated through priestly mediation and sacrifices, and the common people were largely removed from the direct presence of God. The tabernacle, therefore, symbolized both God's proximity and the inherent distance required to maintain the boundaries of divine holiness.

In the Incarnation, however, this notion is radically transformed. By becoming flesh and “pitching His tent” among humanity, Jesus embodies the new, living tabernacle, signifies a shift from the mediated, limited encounters of the Old Testament to the unmediated, accessible presence of God in the person of Christ. This transition marks a decisive break from earlier Jewish tradition, where the holiness of God was preserved through separation. In Christ, the divine-human relationship is characterized by intimacy

⁴⁷ David Wenham and Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament: Volume 1, A Guide to the Gospels & Acts*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), chap. 12, accessed September 14, 2024, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6484916>.

⁴⁸ Barton and Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 960-1000.

and direct engagement, as He enters fully into human experience. This, the Incarnation reconfigures the concept of God's presence – not as a distant, inaccessible reality confined to a sacred structure, but as a tangible, relational presence within human history.

By emphasizing the reality of the Incarnation, John 1:14 challenges any attempt to diminish or deny the full humanity of Christ⁴⁹. However, it is important to acknowledge that the articulation of Christ as “truly God and truly human” was not formally codified until the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century. While the Gospel of John affirms both the divinity and humanity of Christ, the early church wrestled for centuries with the precise language to express this dual nature. The Chalcedonian Definition was a response to various heresies that either overemphasized Christ's divinity (such as Docetism) or His humanity (such as Arianism), ultimately affirming that Jesus is fully God and fully human in one person, without confusion or division. This doctrinal development highlights the ongoing theological reflection necessary to fully grasp the implications of the Incarnation. In becoming flesh, the eternal Word identifies fully with the human condition, experiencing firsthand the joys and sorrows, temptations, and trials of human existence⁵⁰.

In conclusion, the Prologue of John's Gospel is a theological masterpiece, blending poetic elegance with profound theological insight⁵¹. Through its careful structure and rich imagery, the prologue introduces vital theological themes that lay the groundwork for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ. Within this context,

⁴⁹ Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*, 45-49.

⁵⁰ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 91-95.

⁵¹ Köstenberger, *John*, 3-12.

John 1:14 holds a central place, encapsulating the mystery of the Incarnation and its profound implications for human salvation⁵².

II. The Incarnation: Divine Revelation in Human Form

The Meaning of “The Word Became Flesh”

In the Gospel of John prologue, “the Word became flesh” is a central theological theme. This phrase encapsulates the profound truth that the divine, eternal Word of God, identified with Jesus Christ, took on human form, becoming fully human while retaining His full divinity. This act of incarnation signifies a radical transformation as the eternal Word entered humanity’s temporal realm, assuming the limitations and experiences of human existence. The term “flesh” emphasizes this incarnation’s tangible, physical reality. It highlights the Word’s immersion into the human condition with joys, sorrows, and vulnerabilities. This divine act of incarnation reveals God’s deep love and desire to connect with humanity intimately, bridging the gap between the sacred and the human.⁵³

Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word

Within the Johannine context, Jesus Christ is portrayed as the Incarnate Word, the embodiment of divine revelation in human form. The prologue of John’s Gospel establishes Jesus as the pre-existent Word of God, co-eternal with the Father, who

⁵² O’Collins and Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 117.

⁵³ Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 3-38.

became flesh and dwelt among humanity (John 1:1-14)⁵⁴. This theological assertion underscores the unique identity of Jesus Christ as both fully divine and fully human, representing the perfect union of divinity and humanity⁵⁵. Jesus becomes the tangible expression of God's love, grace, and truth through His incarnation, providing humanity with a direct encounter with the divine.⁵⁶ The Incarnate Word is the ultimate mediator between God and humanity,⁵⁷ revealing the Father's heart and fulfilling the divine plan of salvation.⁵⁸

Contrasting Interpretations: Personification vs. Ontological Reality

The interpretation of the Incarnation as presented in John's Gospel stands in contrast to alternative views that attempt to diminish the significance of Christ's dual natures or separate His divinity from His humanity. One such interpretation posits Jesus as merely a divine manifestation in human form, akin to a personification of God rather than an actual ontological reality.⁵⁹

However, the Johannine depiction of the Incarnation affirms the profound theological truth of Jesus Christ as the fully divine Son of God who took on genuine human flesh.⁶⁰ This ontological reality underscores the inseparable unity of Christ's

⁵⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 115-126.

⁵⁵ MacLeod, *The Person of Christ*, 155-180.

⁵⁶ O'Collins and Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 289-290.

⁵⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 601-606.

⁵⁸ Lewis, *John*, 13-26.

⁵⁹ Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 27-31.

⁶⁰ Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 3-38.

divine and human natures, rejecting any attempt to diminish or dismiss either aspect.⁶¹

The Incarnation, as articulated in John's Gospel, serves as the foundation of Christian faith, revealing the divine mystery of God's presence among humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

III. Theological Implications of John 1:14

Participation in the Divine Life

The Theological implications of John 1:14 regarding participation in the divine life are profound. The verse declares that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This statement signifies the Incarnation, where the eternal Logos, the very essence of God, took on human form and lived among humanity. The term "became flesh" emphasizes the divine entering into the human condition, fully embracing humankind with all its limitations and experiences. This act of divine condescension demonstrates God's desire for intimate communion with humanity.⁶²

The concept of participation in the divine life is central to understanding the significance of the Incarnation. Humanity is invited into a deeper relationship with God through the Word, becoming flesh. The divine life, represented by the Word made flesh, is accessible to humanity, enabling individuals to partake in the divine nature (2

⁶¹ Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*, 157-180.

⁶² Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 24-26.

Peter 1:4). This participation involves an intellectual understanding of God and a personal and experiential encounter with the divine.⁶³

The Incarnation bridges the gap between divinity and humanity, allowing for a transformative union between God and humanity. By sharing the human experience, God demonstrates His solidarity with humanity and provides a pathway for humans to share in His divine life. This participation in the divine life is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived reality, where individuals are invited to enter into a dynamic relationship with God characterized by intimacy, communion, and transformation.⁶⁴

Continuity between Jewish and Hellenistic Thought

John 1:14 also highlights the continuity between Jewish and Hellenistic thought within the context of the Incarnation. The prologue of John's Gospel, including verse 14, draws on Jewish and Hellenistic philosophical concepts to articulate the significance of the Word becoming flesh.⁶⁵

In Jewish thought, particularly within the wisdom literature and prophetic tradition, there is a rich understanding of God's presence among His people. The imagery of the tabernacle and the dwelling among us echoes the Old Testament concept of God's presence among His people, as seen in passages like Exodus 25:8 and Isaiah 7:14. The

⁶³ Bultmann et al., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 61-63.

⁶⁴ Köstenberger, *John*, 40-42.

⁶⁵ Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*, 35-40.

idea of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among humanity resonates with the Jewish understanding of God's active presence and engagement with His creation.⁶⁶

John's Christology, particularly in the prologue, draws significantly from Jewish Wisdom traditions, where Wisdom (Sophia) is personified as dwelling with humanity and actively participating in creation (e.g., Proverbs 8). This background provides a vital framework for understanding the Word becoming flesh in John 1:14. Raymond Brown emphasizes that the Logos in John mirrors the role of Wisdom in Jewish literature – serving as an intermediary between God and the world, embodying divine knowledge, and making God's presence accessible to creation.⁶⁷ John's Christology, therefore, does not merely introduce a new concept but builds upon the rich Jewish tradition of God's immanent presence, reinterpreting it in light of the Incarnation. By casting the Logos as the eternal Word made flesh, John integrates and surpasses Jewish Wisdom traditions, presenting Jesus as the ultimate manifestation of divine wisdom and presence among humanity.

Furthermore, the Hellenistic concept of logos, which denotes the rational principle underlying the cosmos, is incorporated into John's theological framework. While "logos" may have had philosophical connotations in Hellenistic, John imbues it with more profound theological significance by identifying it with Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word and blending it with concepts of divine wisdom.⁶⁸ This synthesis of Jewish and

⁶⁶ Barton and Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 932-935.

⁶⁷ Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 24-29.

⁶⁸ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1980), 247-250.

Hellenistic thought underscores the universal importance of the Incarnation and its relevance to both Jewish and Gentile audiences.

The Impact of Stoic and Jewish Philosophical Concepts

The theological implication of John 1:14 also reflects the impact of Stoic and Jewish philosophical concepts on early Christian theology. Stoicism, a prominent philosophical school in the Hellenistic world, emphasized the divine reason (*logos*) pervading the cosmos and guiding all things toward a rational order. This notion of *logos* as divine reason finds resonance in John's portrayal of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word through whom God's divine plan is revealed and realized.⁶⁹

Additionally, Jewish philosophical concepts, particularly those found in the wisdom and apocalyptic literature, contribute to the theological framework of John's Gospel. The idea of God's wisdom and Word as active agents in creation and redemption is evident in Jewish and early Christian writings. The idea of God's wisdom and Word as active agents in creation and redemption is deeply rooted in Jewish thought, where Wisdom is often portrayed not only as present with God during creation but also as a guiding force that sustains and orders the cosmos (Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-8:1). Early Christian writings build upon this foundation, particularly in identifying the preexistent Christ with the Logos, the divine Word, through whom all things were made (John 1:3). This alignment between Jewish Wisdom traditions and early Christian Christology highlights how both Wisdom and Logos function as personifications of God's self-revelation, bridging the transcendent and immanent aspects of God's interaction with

⁶⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 103-106.

creation. The early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, further developed this concept, emphasizing Christ as the incarnate Logos, the ultimate agent of both creation and redemption.⁷⁰ John's identification of Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh builds upon this Jewish understanding of divine wisdom and revelation.⁷¹

John 1:14 embodies a rich tapestry of theological themes that resonate with Jewish and Hellenistic philosophical traditions. The concept of the Word becoming flesh speaks to the universal longing for divine presence and revelation while also affirming the unique identity of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God. The Incarnation invites humanity to participate in the divine life, bridging the gap between the transcendent God and the created world.⁷²

IV. Historical and Textual Analysis of John 1:14

Variations in Manuscripts and Translations

The textual history of John 1:14 has been relatively stable, with minimal variations in manuscripts and translations. The primary variations that exist are minor discrepancies in wording or syntax, which do not significantly alter the theological

⁷⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 61, in *the Apostolic Fathers and the Early Church*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 125-126; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 10, in *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 189-191; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book 1, chap. 2, in *The Early Church Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*, ed. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Classics, 1994), 70-71; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, chap. 16, in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, ed. Robert M. Grant (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1997), 178-180.

⁷¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 21-23.

⁷² Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 74-76.

meaning of the verse. Across different manuscripts and translations, the central message of the incarnation of the Word remains consistent, emphasizing the divine becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.⁷³

Johannine Communities and High Christology

The Gospel of John, including John 1:14, reflects the theological developments within the Johannine communities, particularly regarding their understanding of Christ's nature and identity. These communities, influenced by Jewish and Hellenistic thought, developed a high Christology that emphasized the divinity of Jesus Christ. This high Christology is evident in John 1:14, which affirms the incarnation of the divine Word as the central theme of the Gospel.⁷⁴

The Johannine communities' high Christology contrasts the Arian view, which diminishes the full divinity of Christ. John's Gospel, including John 1:14, presents Jesus Christ as fully divine and human, rejecting any attempts to separate or diminish either aspect of his nature.⁷⁵

Affirmation of the Incarnational Statement

John 1:14 serves as a foundational text affirming the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the divine Word made flesh. The verse emphasizes the profound theological concept of God taking on human form, dwelling among humanity, and revealing his glory through

⁷³ Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, 21-23.

⁷⁴ Ashton, *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*, 35-40.

⁷⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 103-106.

Jesus Christ. This affirmation of the incarnation is essential in refuting low Christological views, such as the Arian perspective, which fails to recognize Christ's full divinity.⁷⁶

The theological significance of John 1:14 lies in its portrayal of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God's divine plan for humanity. Through the incarnation, God's purpose and design for humankind are revealed, demonstrating the inseparable union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ. This understanding of the incarnation underscores the importance of recognizing and affirming Christ's full divinity and humanity, as revealed in John 1:14 and throughout the Gospel of John.⁷⁷

Conclusion

This exegetical exploration of John 1:14 illuminates the profound theological significance of the Incarnation as depicted in the Gospel of John. Through carefully analyzing the prologue's structure, theological themes, and historical context, I hope those participating in this project will gain a deeper appreciation for the divine nature of Jesus Christ as the pre-existent Word made flesh. By affirming the ontological reality of the Incarnate Word, John invites readers to encounter the mystery of God's revelation in human form and to embrace the transformative implications of this profound truth. As students engage with the Gospel of John, I hope they will be drawn ever closer to the person of Jesus Christ, who embodies divine wisdom and offers the promise of eternal life to all who believe.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ O'Collins and Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 144-145.

⁷⁷ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 247-250.

⁷⁸ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 101-105.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter examines the historical foundation of my doctoral project, which addresses a reductionist perspective on the Incarnation within the American Mainline Protestant Church. If professing members receive enhanced education on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, encompassing his divinity and dual natures, then they will obtain a Christological understanding more closely aligned with traditional teachings of Christology. A reductionist view of Christology, particularly in the Incarnation, will be understood as an Arian heretical view of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Many clergy hold this Arianistic view in the American Mainline Protestant Church; an example is provided by Rev. Roger Wolsey, an ordained United Methodist pastor, who said, “I do believe that Jesus was divine (in the way that you and I are) and that he’s the 2nd person of the Trinity. Christians honor and celebrate Jesus as a unique and fully incarnated manifestation of God. I don’t believe he’s God (at least not what most people tend to mean by that word).”¹ How can one believe in the Incarnation as revealed by John and discount the divinity of Christ? This paper will argue that it is simply impossible by referencing the work of this historical church father, Saint Athanasius.

¹ Roger Wolsey, “It’s Time for Progressive Christianity,” *The Holy Kiss*, last modified 2022, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerwolsey/2018/05/its-time-for-progressive-christianity/>.

This chapter is organized into three sections. Following this introduction, the body will relate the teachings of Athanasius of Alexandria to my current work and context. Finally, a summary will describe how studying this historical church father and his teachings is foundational to my project.

Historical Context of Athanasius

Saint Athanasius (c. 295-373) stands as a significant figure in early Christian theology, known for his vigorous defense of Christology amidst the theological challenges of his time.² Born in Egypt and educated in the prestigious Catechetical School of Alexandria, Athanasius was profoundly influenced by the martyrdoms he witnessed during the persecutions, experiences that shaped his theological convictions and unwavering commitment to the Incarnation.³

The era in which Athanasius lived was marked by profound changes within the Roman Empire and the Christian Church. With Emperor Constantine's conversion, theological debates intensified, particularly the Arian controversy. Central to this dispute was Arius's assertion of the Son's subordinate status to the Father, challenging traditional understandings of Christ's divinity.⁴

Athanasius not only engaged in theological disputes but also advocated for a holistic Christian life centered on orthodoxy and asceticism.⁵ His theological framework,

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1 - The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 188.

³ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 188.

⁴ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381 AD* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1988), 145.

⁵ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 190.

heavily influenced by Alexandrian predecessors like Origen, emphasized the salvific significance of the Incarnation. Athanasius argued that through the Word becoming flesh, humanity was restored to communion with God, a theme elaborated in his seminal work “On the Incarnation.”⁶

Modern interpretations sometimes overlook the intricate socio-political and theological dynamics of Athanasius’s time, thereby mischaracterizing his contributions to Christian thought and identity.⁷ By contextualizing Athanasius within his historical milieu, we gain a deeper understanding of his enduring legacy and the significance of his theological insights on the development of Christian doctrine.

Athanasius’ Theological Contributions

Athanasius argued that the Incarnation was necessary to overcome death and corruption, revealing God’s goodness and grace. He believed that by becoming human, the Word of God provided humanity with the hope of resurrection and revealed Himself to humanity.⁸ The Savior, being both fully human and divine, accomplished the redemption of humanity through His death and resurrection.⁹ Athanasius emphasized the necessity of the Incarnation for redemption, atonement, and salvation, a truth often overlooked in the modern church.¹⁰

⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 32-33.

⁷ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 167.

⁸ David Watson, “The Scandal of the Incarnation,” in *Good News Magazine*, 3. Accessed November 4, 2022. <https://goodnewsmag.org/the-scandal-of-the-incarnation/>.

⁹ James D. Ernest, “The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria” (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2004), 49.

¹⁰ Ligonier ministries, “The State of Theology,” 2018, <https://thestateoftheology.com/>.

In *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, Athanasius presents the doctrinal principles he upheld. At the same time, *Orationes contra Arianos* constructs his interpretation of the fourth-century debates as a polarized controversy between orthodoxy and heresy.¹¹ In *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* and *De Synodis Arimini et Seleuciaae*, Athanasius endorses the Nicene Creed and acknowledges the diversity of beliefs within the church.¹² His understanding of Arianism as the precursor of the Antichrist and his defense of the Incarnation as necessary for human salvation is central to his theological legacy.¹³

In *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, Athanasius asserted that the Incarnation of Christ was not merely a historical event but a theological necessity rooted in God's plan for humanity's redemption. According to Athanasius, the Word of God became human to overcome the twin threats of death and corruption that had ensnared humanity since the Fall. This divine act revealed God's profound goodness and grace towards humanity, offering the hope of resurrection and restoring the broken relationship between God and humanity.¹⁴

Central to Athanasius' theological framework was the belief that in assuming human nature, Christ accomplished what no mere human could achieve: the redemption and atonement of humanity through His sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. Athanasius emphasized that Christ, being fully human and fully divine, uniquely bridged

¹¹ Stuart Hall, *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 13.

¹² Hall, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 157.

¹³ Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria*, 45.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, ed. Robert W. Thomson, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 551 (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Publishers, 1994), 7-9.

the gap between God and humanity, reconciling them and restoring the image of God in humanity tarnished by sin.¹⁵

In his writings, Athanasius articulates these theological convictions with clarity and conviction. In *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, he delineates the doctrinal principles that underpin his defense of the Incarnation against contemporary challenges. Here, Athanasius not only defends the orthodox positions but also elucidates the profound implications of Christ's divine-human nature for salvation and the restoration of creation.¹⁶

Moreover, in *Orationes contra Arianos*, Athanasius engages directly with the Arian controversy, framing it as a fundamental doctrinal dispute between orthodoxy and heresy. His defense of the Nicene Creed in *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* and his reflections on the councils of Ariminum and Seleucia in *De Synodis Arimini et Seleucia* underscore his commitment to preserving the orthodox understanding of Christ's nature and salvific work.

Athanasius' theological legacy extends beyond doctrinal precision; it encompasses a robust defense of the Incarnation as essential for human salvation and the defeat of sin and death. His identification of Arianism as a precursor to the Antichrist underscores his belief in the profound spiritual implications of theological error and the importance of doctrinal fidelity within the Christian community.

Athanasius' theological contributions continue to resonate within Christian theology, emphasizing the centrality of the Incarnation for understanding God's

¹⁵ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, 15-17.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, 23-25.

redemptive plan. His defense of Christ's dual nature as essential for salvation remains a poignant reminder of the enduring significance of theological clarity and fidelity to biblical truth in the life of the Church.

Theological Context of Arianism

To further understand Athanasius' contributions, it is crucial to delve into the theological context of Arianism. Origen, an earlier Alexandrian theologian, emphasized the superiority of the Father over the Son, proposing the eternal generation of the Son and using the term "hypostases" to refer to the Trinity's members.¹⁷ This set the stage for the fourth-century theological controversies, including Arianism.¹⁸ Arius' teachings, which denied the full divinity of Christ, were seen as a threat to the unity and integrity of Christian doctrine.¹⁹ Arius emphasized the divinity of God the Father as unique from the Son or Spirit. Arius subordinated Jesus to the Father, holding the Son is like God, but not equal to the Father. Arius believed that:

(The Son) cannot be eternal because He is begotten and therefore has a beginning, and for the same reason He cannot share in the *ousia* of the unbegotten Father. The Son' has nothing proper [*idios*] to God according to personal substance [*hypostasis*], for He is neither equal nor *homoousious* with Him...The Father is alien according to essence [*ousia*] to the Son, because He exists without beginning' (*Thalia, De synodis 15*). Moreover, the Son cannot fully know the Oe God, who is transcendent and unknowable. 'It is clear that for one who has a beginning to encompass by thought or apprehension the one who is without beginning is impossible' (*Thalia, De Synodis 15*). The Son is word, wisdom, and

¹⁷ Hall, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 25.

¹⁸ Hall, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 25.

¹⁹ B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to A.D. 461* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1922), 155.

Power, but He received these qualities from the Father, who possesses them inherently and eternally.²⁰

Athanasius' defense of the Incarnation against Arianism emphasized that reducing Christ's divinity undermines the possibility of redemption and salvation.²¹ He argued that the Incarnation was necessary to overcome death and corruption, revealing God's goodness and grace.²² By becoming a human, the Word of God gave humanity the hope of resurrection and revealed Himself to humanity.²³ The Savior, being both fully human and divine, accomplished the redemption of humanity through His death and resurrection.²⁴

Athanasius' Scriptural Exegesis

Athanasius draws from Genesis, Proverbs, and the fourth Gospel, John. In section 13 of his First Oration against the Arians, he concludes that Scripture reveals the eternal and everlasting nature of Jesus Christ, the Logos, the Son. The importance of biblical interpretation between Arius and Athanasius is on full display in his work and conclusion, as the arguments made by Athanasius rely upon exegesis and understanding of words in the biblical texts. This can be seen clearly in 13.56 of the "First Oration" in which he states:

Scripture, in speaking thus, implies, O Arians, not that the son is originate, but rather other than things originate, and proper to the Father, begin in His bosom.

²⁰ David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55.

²¹ Hall, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 27.

²² Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 50.

²³ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 52.

²⁴ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 52.

Nor does even the expression 'become,' which here occurs, show that the son is originate, as you suppose. If indeed it were simply 'become; and no more, a case might stand for the Arians, but whereas they are forestalled with the word 'Son' throughout the passage, showing that He is other than things originate, so again not even the word 'become' occurs absolutely, but 'better' is immediately subjoined.²⁵

The above citation addresses the Arian controversy, where Arius argued that the Son, Jesus Christ, was a created being and not co-eternal with the Father. The author refutes this claim by appealing to Scripture, emphasizing that the Son is not originate or created, but rather eternally begotten and proper to the Father, existing in an intimate, unique relationship with Him, as suggested by the phrase "being in His bosom." This language, drawn from passages like John 1:18, underscores the Son's divine essence, distinguishing Him from creation and affirming His eternal unity with the Father.

The author acknowledges that the word "become," which Arians use to suggest the Son's creation, could superficially support their claim. However, Scripture never uses the term "become" in isolation when referring to the Son. Instead, the Son is consistently described in relational terms, particularly as the "Son," indicating a mode of existence different from created beings. The author concedes that if Scripture only used "become" without further clarification, Arius's argument might seem plausible. However, the term "Son" emphasizes the Son's unique and eternal relationship with the Father, which refutes the notion of the Son being created.

Additionally, the word "better," as found in Hebrews 1:4, which describes the Son as being "much better than the angels," further solidifies the Son's superiority over all

²⁵ Andy Witchger, "Arianism, Athanasius, and the Effect on Trinitarian Thought," 2007, School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses, no. 24, https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/24.

created beings. This comparison underscores that the Son is not merely part of creation but holds a divine status above all things that "become." Combining these scriptural insights, the author demonstrates that the Son shares the same divine essence as the Father, making Him eternal and uncreated, effectively countering Arianism's assertion that the Son is a created being.

Throughout his "orations," Athanasius bases and roots his arguments upon Scripture. Athanasius utilizes the entirety of Scripture for the foundation of his reasoning and opinions, especially the Gospel of John, due to the fourth gospel's emphasis on the closeness of the Father/Son relationship between Jesus, the Logos, the Son, and God, the Father. By focusing on the fourth gospel, John, Athanasius hopes to convince his audience that the Logos is not divided or different in the manner that Arius claims.

Using passages such as John 16:15, "All things that the Father has are mine," (First Oration, Chapter 13.61), John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life," (First oration, Chapter 6.19), and John 14:9, "Whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father," (First Oration, Chapter 6.21), Athanasius places emphasis on those texts which emphasize the Son's likeness to the Father. Yet, for every verse of Scripture which provides Athanasius with support, there seems to be another that supports the view of Arius. Athanasius specifically addresses many of these texts because of what he believes to be Arian misinterpretation. John 14:28, "My Father is better than I," (First Oration, Chapter 13.58), is addressed, as is the ever-contentious Proverbs 8:22-23, "The Lord begot me, the first-born of his ways, the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago; Or ever the earth was, when there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, was I brought forth."²⁶

Scripture is a core component in the dispute between Athanasius and Arianism. Athanasius, in his "Orations Against the Arians," takes a systematic approach to these issues. The primary disputed texts are used to create the foundation of the text. In contrast, the minor texts are dispersed throughout. These texts appear wherever they are

²⁶ Witchger, "Arianism, Athanasius, and the Effect on Trinitarian Thought," 4.

relevant to the particular argument Athanasius presents and receive little attention relative to primary disputed texts.

When addressing a primary disputed text, Athanasius identifies the excerpt, explains that the Arians have propagated a misunderstanding of the text, and responds clearly and immediately. The main scriptural text of importance for the dispute is Proverbs 8:22-23, as this text assumes a place of prominence in Athanasius' discussion. In his "Orationes contra Arianos," Athanasius systematically addresses the scriptural interpretations used by Arians, particularly Proverbs 8:22-23, which Arians used to argue for the created nature of the Son.²⁷ Athanasius' exegesis of these texts supports Christ's eternal and divine nature, countering the Arian claim of Christ's subordination to the Father.²⁸ Athanasius demonstrates the coherence of the orthodox view of the Incarnation by focusing on passages that emphasize the Son's likeness to the Father.²⁹ His systematic approach to addressing disputed texts highlights the importance of scriptural exegesis in theological debates.³⁰ James Ernest states:

The overwhelming prominence of Prov 8:22 is evident from the fact that Athanasius announces this text three times only to defer treatment of it while dealing with other major texts (the first two times) or presenting a lengthy introductory essay on related themes (the third time). The fourth time he announces that he is ready to take it on, and the following twenty-nine paragraphs are devoted to it, then another eleven to its context. Thus it dominates the whole second half of CA 2 and also casts a long shadow backward into CA 1.³¹

²⁷ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 52.

²⁸ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 53.

²⁹ Hall, *Athanasius*, 33.

³⁰ Hall, *Athanasius*, 35.

³¹ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 120.

Athanasius's interpretation of Proverbs 8:22 plays a pivotal role in his defense against Arianism, particularly in clarifying the nature of the Son's relationship to the Father. Arians famously appealed to this verse, which reads, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work," to support their claim that the Son is a created being. However, in his *Orations Against the Arians*, Athanasius argues that this passage should not be understood as implying that the Son is a part of creation or originates as a creature.³² Instead, Athanasius interprets "created" as referring to the Son's role in the divine economy of salvation, not to His eternal essence or nature. He distinguishes the Son's eternal generation from the Father and His temporal mission in creation. For Athanasius, Proverbs 8:22 points to the incarnation, where the Son, though eternally begotten, took on flesh as part of the divine plan to redeem humanity. Athanasius insists that the Son's divine essence remains uncreated and consubstantial with the Father, preserving the eternal relationship between the two. Thus, the term "created" in this context signifies the Son's functional role in the economy of salvation, not His ontological status, thereby refuting Arian claims of the Son being a created entity. This reading upholds the orthodox Trinitarian view that the Son is eternally begotten, not made, sharing fully in the divine nature of the Father.

Following Athanasius' use of biblical texts to confront the Arian viewpoint, he also uses them to support his argument. Athanasius uses the writings attributed to Paul, John, and Peter to build a foundation from scripture to support the Nicene position. He also references texts from Psalms and the writings of the Prophets. Athanasius' personal

³² Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, translated by Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, Vol. 4, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892).

views regarding scriptural texts come through as we can examine how he utilizes each of these texts to defend his position. Athanasius believes that each book of the bible is the inspired word of God, showed evidently in his “Orations Against the Arians.” Studying Athanasius’ methods for attributing citations in his works, James Ernest states that, “For Athanasius, the divine word speaks through all Scripture, and accordingly citations from any part of the Bible may be attributed to “the Lord” (44 citations).”³³

Athanasius’ Legacy

Athanasius’ understanding of the Incarnation has profound theological implications. He viewed the Incarnation as the central event of salvation history, through which God entered into human history to redeem and restore humanity.³⁴ By affirming Christ's full divinity and humanity, Athanasius’ teachings provide a robust theological framework that counters reductionist views of Christology.³⁵ His emphasis on the Incarnation as the means of human salvation underscores the necessity of maintaining a high Christology in contemporary theological discourse.³⁶

The Nicene Creed, formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325, was a pivotal moment in the history of Christian doctrine. Athanasius played a crucial role in defending and articulating the creed’s affirmation of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father.³⁷ His steadfast commitment to the Nicene faith in the face of opposition and exile

³³ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 121.

³⁴ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 49.

³⁵ Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 50.

³⁶ Ernst, *Bible in Athanasius*, 51.

³⁷ Hall, *Athanasius*, 37.

is a testament to his unwavering dedication to orthodox Christology.³⁸ The Nicene Creed's affirmation of the full divinity of Christ remains a cornerstone of Christian doctrine and a bulwark against heretical views.³⁹

Athanasius' theological contributions also had a lasting impact on later theologians and church councils. His defense of the Incarnation and the Nicene faith influenced the development of Christological doctrine in subsequent centuries.⁴⁰ Athanasius' theology profoundly influenced the Council of Constantinople in 381, reaffirming the Nicene Creed and expanding its formulations.⁴¹ His writings and teachings continued to inspire and guide theologians such as Augustine of Hippo and the Cappadocian Fathers.⁴²

Athanasius' Christology remains relevant for contemporary theological and pastoral education. His emphasis on Christ's full divinity and humanity provides a robust framework for addressing reductionist views of Christology in the American Mainline Protestant Church.⁴³ By upholding the orthodox understanding of the Incarnation, Athanasius' teachings offer a theological foundation for deepening pastors' understanding of Christology and equipping them to address modern manifestations of Arianism.⁴⁴

³⁸ Hall, *Athanasius*, 39.

³⁹ B. J. Kidd, *History of the Church*, 159.

⁴⁰ Watson, "Scandal of the Incarnation."

⁴¹ Ligonier Ministries, "State of Theology."

⁴² Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 55.

⁴³ Hall, *Athanasius*, 41.

⁴⁴ Hall, *Athanasius*, 41.

Athanasius's legacy is important due to the prevalent low Christology and weak view of the Incarnation in contemporary Protestantism. David Watson, President of Asbury Theological Seminary, notes that many have reduced the significance of Jesus to that of a sagacious person rather than recognizing the union of divine and human in the Incarnation.⁴⁵ Watson goes on to state that:

Within the last three centuries, many have tried to tell us that the significance of Jesus is not that God became human, that within Jesus is a union of divine and human, or that through his death and resurrection we are forgiven and free from sin. Rather, they have said, Jesus was a supremely wise person, along the lines of Socrates or Confucius. They might suggest that Jesus had an acute "God consciousness." His spiritual sensitivity and perceptiveness toward the will of God gave him insights much like those wise sages who have existed across the centuries. We should listen to what he taught and live accordingly, rather than focusing on these ancient myths of Incarnation, atonement, and resurrection.⁴⁶

This reductionist view of Jesus as merely a moral teacher rather than the Incarnate God undermines the orthodox Christian belief in the divine-human nature of Christ and the salvific implications of his life, death, and resurrection.

According to a recent report by Ligonier Ministries, 43 percent of evangelical Christians in the United States agree with the statement, "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God."⁴⁷ This statistic highlights a significant trend within evangelicalism where a substantial portion of believers do not affirm the full deity of Christ. This rejection of the Incarnation mirrors the core dispute between Athanasius and Arius, wherein Arius denied the full divinity of Christ, considering him as a created being rather than co-eternal with the Father.

⁴⁵ Watson, "Scandal of the Incarnation."

⁴⁶ Watson, "Scandal of the Incarnation."

⁴⁷ Ligonier Ministries, "State of Theology."

Moreover, contemporary theologians and scholars continue to grapple with the implications of these views on Christian doctrine and practice. Some argue that a low Christology not only undermines the foundational tenets of Christianity but also diminishes the transformative power of Christ's atoning work. For instance, Richard Bauckham argues for a robust understanding of the Incarnation that emphasizes the continuity between Jesus's human and divine natures, challenging modern tendencies to reduce Jesus to a mere moral exemplar.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the resurgence of interest in historical Jesus studies has prompted debates about how Jesus should be understood within the context of his time and culture. While scholars seek to uncover the historical Jesus, there is a risk of separating this historical inquiry from the theological affirmations of the early Church regarding Christ's identity and mission. N. T. Wright argues for a balanced approach that integrates historical investigation with theological reflection, affirming the early Church's belief in Jesus as the Incarnate Son of God.⁴⁹

The persistence of low Christology and the rejection of the Incarnation among contemporary Christians reflect ongoing challenges reminiscent of the Arian controversy in the early Church. Athanasius's defense for the full divinity and humanity of Christ remains a critical touchstone for reaffirming the orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Son of God whose life, death, and resurrection are central to Christian faith and salvation.

⁴⁸ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 78-82.

⁴⁹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 215-220.

Conclusion

The study of Saint Athanasius and his defense of classical Christology is foundational to addressing the reductionist views in the American Mainline Protestant Church. Athanasius' unwavering commitment to the Nicene faith and his profound understanding of the Incarnation as essential for human salvation provides a robust theological framework for contemporary pastoral education. By emphasizing Christ's full divinity and humanity, Athanasius' teachings counter the modern manifestations of the Arian heresy and uphold the orthodox Christian faith. This is particularly relevant in a contemporary context where the deity and humanity of Christ are often either diminished or misunderstood, which risks undermining the core of Christian doctrine. The reductionist tendencies in many strands of American Mainline Protestantism today mirror the early church's battles with Arianism, and Athanasius' resolute defense of the Nicene Creed provides a model for confronting these theological distortions. His defense not only emphasizes the necessity of Christ's divinity for salvation but also underscores the profound mystery of the Incarnation as central to Christian belief and practice.

Athanasius' insistence of the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ is not merely a theological abstraction but is crucial for understanding the nature of God's revelation in history. For Athanasius, the Incarnation is the means by which humanity is reconciled with God, and without the full participation of Christ in both the divine and human natures, this reconciliation would be impossible. In this way, Athanasius offers a vision of salvation that is not simply moral or symbolic but ontological, requiring a complete and transformative union of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. In the face of modern theological reductionism, where aspects of Christ's divinity or

humanity are downplayed or disregarded, Athanasius' teachings provide a powerful corrective. His theology calls contemporary Christians to recover the robust understanding of the Incarnation that is central not only to soteriology but to the very nature of Christian life and worship. Christ's dual nature is essential for understanding the scope of salvation; without both aspects, human beings would be left in their sin, unable to bridge the gap between their finite existence and the infinite God.

Athanasius' theological vision challenges the tendency in some corners of American Mainline Protestantism to treat Christ's Incarnation and work on the cross as isolated events, separated from the broader narrative of divine salvation. Athanasius emphasizes that the Incarnation is not merely a moment in time but an ongoing act of God's presence within the created world. This holistic view of the Incarnation shapes the way Christians understand their participation in the life of Christ and their relationship with God. The Incarnation is not just an event of the past but an ongoing reality that Christians experience through the sacraments, the church, and the Word. Athanasius' insistence that Christ's full divinity and humanity are essential for salvation requires a participatory faith, in which believers are invited to share in the life of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out the implications of the Incarnation in their daily lives. This theological emphasis on participation counters reductionist view that treat Christianity as a mere system of ethical teaching or personal moralism. The work of salvation, according to Athanasius, is comprehensive and transformative, inviting Christians to enter fully into the life of Christ, which has been made possible by his full participation in human life.

Athanasius' Christology also provides an important framework for contemporary pastoral education and theological reflection. As pastors and theologians seek to guide the church into modernity, they are faced with the task of combating both the overt heresies of modern theological movements and the subtler, more insidious tendencies to reduce Christ to a mere example or teacher. In an age where many American Mainline Protestant communities are seeking relevance and connection to contemporary culture, it can be tempting to downplay the more challenging aspects of classical Christology in favor of a more palatable, individualized understanding of Christ. Athanasius' defense of Nicene orthodoxy offers a compelling response to such temptations. He shows that the fullness of Christ's divinity and humanity is not an abstract theological debate but the very heart of Christian faith and practice. Pastors today must, like Athanasius, stand firm in defending the necessity of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity, teaching that it is through the full union of God and humanity in Christ that believers are reconciled to God and empowered to live out the implications of that reconciliation in their lives.

In addressing the modern manifestations of Arianism, which often take the form of a diminished or skewed view of Christ's nature, Athanasius offers a model for pastoral education that emphasizes the importance of doctrinal fidelity. Arianism, whether explicitly or implicitly, often results in a view of Christ that is less than divine, undermining the very foundation of the Christian gospel. The reduction of Christ to a mere human being or a created being, while still noble or exemplary, fails to offer the redemptive power necessary for salvation. Athanasius' teachings remind us that the stakes of Christological disputes are not simply academic but deeply practical, impacting

the way Christians understand their relationship with God, their ability to participate in the divine life, and their hope for eternal life. By teaching the full and unaltered doctrine of the Incarnation as Athanasius has articulated it, pastoral leaders can equip the church to stand firm against the temptations of reductionist thinking and embrace the fullness of the gospel that leads to true transformation.

Athanasius' defense of the Incarnation, particularly his commitment to the Nicene understanding of Christ, is not only a defense of a historical doctrine but a challenge to the church to recover its true identity. In an era of theological pluralism, relativism, and theological uncertainty, his work remains a beacon for the church, calling it back to the central truth of the Christian faith, that God became flesh for the sake of humanity's salvation. Through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, humanity is not merely shown the way to God; rather, in the person of Jesus Christ, humanity is brought into the very life of God. The task of the church today is to recover this truth with the same fervor and clarity with which Athanasius defended it in his own time. The Incarnation is not a doctrine to be negotiated or watered down, but the central event in human history that makes salvation possible and real. By embracing the full mystery of the Incarnation as Athanasius did, the American Mainline Protestant church can resist the reductionist trends of modernity and proclaim with confidence the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Classical Christology teaches that Christ has two natures: human and divine. Classical Christology is crucial in affirming the deity of Jesus Christ. In John 8:58, Jesus declares, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Here, Jesus claims to be the eternal God, revealing his divinity and divine nature. Colossians 2:9 states that “in Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” These passages and others indicate that Jesus is fully human divine. Thus, Christianity is often described as an incarnational faith.

The looser meaning characterizes Christianity as a religion in which man’s approach to God is through the physical world rather than by escape from it. In its narrower sense it constitutes a description of Christianity as a faith whose central tenet affirms the incarnation of God in the particular individual Jesus of Nazareth.¹

The primary goal of the incarnation is reconciliation. According to the Bible, sin separated humanity from God, and Jesus’ death on the cross bridges this gap. Within Wesleyan theology, the doctrines of sin and atonement are not abstract metaphysical postulates, but profoundly Christocentric realities that find their coherence in the mystery of the Incarnation. John Wesley understood original sin not merely as inherited guilt but as a radical corruption of the human will and affections, a deformation of the *imago Dei*

¹ John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1977), 1.

that renders humanity incapable of true love for God or neighbor apart from prevenient grace. The universality of sin is thus inseparable from the universality of grace, for as in Adam all die, so in Christ all are made alive (1 Cor. 15:22). This dialectic lies at the heart of Wesley's soteriology and finds its fullest expression in the enfleshed life of the Son of God.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ represents the divine initiative to restore what sin has disordered. Wesley's insistence on the real and personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ grounds his understanding of salvation as both forensic and therapeutic. The problem of sin is not only juridical but ontological, it is the disintegration of humanity's communion with God, a sickness that no mere moral reform can cure. The Word became flesh not simply to reveal divine truth but to reconstitute human nature itself. In the person of the Incarnate Son, humanity is assumed, healed, and perfected. This is consonant with Wesley's frequent appeal to the *communication idiomatum*, whereby the attributes of the divine and human natures are united in the single person of Christ for the purpose of human redemption.

Atonement is the culmination of the Incarnation, not its negation. The cross is intelligible only because the one who suffers is God incarnate; it is the decisive moment in which divine love enters the deepest abyss of human sin and transforms it from within. Wesley's "moral government" theory of the atonement sought to preserve both divine justice and divine mercy without collapsing one into the other. Yet beneath its juridical framing lies a profoundly participatory logic: Christ's obedience "unto death" restores the moral order of the cosmos precisely because it manifests the perfect love that Adam

forfeited. Therefore, the atonement is not merely the satisfaction of divine law but the restoration of divine likeness in humanity.

This incarnational soteriology also shapes a vision of sanctification. The same Spirit who united the human and divine nature in Christ now communicates that healing presence to believers, effecting in them a real transformation. Original sin is counteracted not simply by imputed righteousness but by imparted holiness, a process of Christian formation through the indwelling Spirit. The Incarnation, therefore, extends beyond Bethlehem and Calvary into the very life of the Church, the continuing locus of Christ's embodied grace.

In this sense, the doctrine of sin and atonement, when read through a Wesleyan lens, reveals that salvation is neither a legal fiction nor an abstract transaction. It is the incarnate life of God in Christ made operative in human existence. The Word made flesh does not merely compensate for sin; He recreates humanity in the image of divine love. The Incarnation is thus both the presupposition and the telos of atonement, the eternal Word entering human history to heal what sin has fractured and to restore all creation to its intended participation in the life of God. The doctrine of the incarnation teaches that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, thus making it possible for him to be the mediator between God and humanity.

This theological study relates to and informs my project by providing theological analysis of objections to and warrant to classical views of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. My hypothesis solves the problem of a reductionist perspective on the Incarnation within the American Mainline Protestant Church. If professing members receive enhanced education on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, encompassing his divinity and dual natures,

then they will obtain a Christological understanding more closely aligned with traditional teachings of Christology. Contrasting the differences between an orthodox understanding of theology, such as by Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, and a reduced view, presented by theologians such as David Felten, will help better define the differences between theological stances and assist the class curriculum design and formation for my project.

Opposition to Classical Christology

There is a reductionist view of the Incarnation and, in turn, a reductionist view of Classical Christology in the American Mainline Protestant Church. This lack of belief in the divine nature of Christ is a lack of belief and understanding of the dual natures which Christ possesses as a result of the incarnation. Such a lack of belief could be due to the objection that the various stages of human life are not befitting God, such as objecting to the resurrection from the dead as befitting God because death itself is unbefitting. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, these objections do not employ the proper criterion of shame and moral beauty. The economy cannot be criticized if the criterion is appropriately applied.²

St. Gregory of Nyssa's statement about objections not employing the proper "criterion of shame and moral beauty" reflects his broader theological and philosophical approach to ethical reasoning. Gregory held that true morality is rooted in understanding divine beauty and goodness. When people object to certain moral teachings or practices, their objections might be based on subjective or superficial standards of shame or honor

² Gregory the Great, *Catechetical Discourse: A Handbook for Catechists*, trans. Ignatius Green (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019), 72.

rather than an objective understanding of what is genuinely morally beautiful, as revealed by God.³

In Gregory's thought, moral beauty reflects the divine nature in human conduct, which manifests through virtues such as love, humility, and purity. To Gregory, the standard of moral beauty is God's goodness, and humans, created in the image of God, are called to reflect that beauty. On the other hand, shame must be understood as that which deviates from this divine standard.⁴

Therefore, when Gregory says these objections do not employ the proper criterion, he means that critics use human, worldly standards to evaluate what is shameful or honorable instead of aligning their judgments with the divine standards of moral beauty and truth. Gregory emphasizes that what is truly shameful or beautiful can only be properly discerned in the context of divine will and purpose, not by mere human convention or societal norms.⁵ Thus, moral discernment should always be anchored in God's nature and the transformative call to live according to divine goodness.⁶

Others object that human nature, being small and circumscribed, is incompatible with the omnipotence of divine nature. Still others object to the divinity of Christ, and therefore the dual natures of Christ through the incarnation, because they question how

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 72.

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 115.

⁵ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 89.

⁶ Giulio Maspero, *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium III* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007), 132.

the divine could be united with the human in the incarnation. Others ask, what is the cause of the divine condescension to our human nature?

We can gather the various objections to classical Christology into five major ones:

1. **Historical Contextualization:** Classical Christology predominantly emphasizes Jesus's divine nature, often overshadowing his time's socio-political and cultural context. This approach neglects the understanding of Jesus as a historical figure whose actions were shaped by the socio-economic realities and theological debates of first-century Palestine.
2. **Inclusivity and Diversity:** Classical Christology predominantly focuses on Jesus' divinity, divorcing him from his humanity and marginalizing the experiences and perspectives of diverse cultures and traditions. This approach tends to homogenize the understanding of Jesus, disregarding the rich diversity of human experiences and theological interpretations across different historical and cultural contexts.
3. **Scriptural Interpretation:** Classical Christology relies heavily on selective scriptural interpretations, often prioritizing specific texts and disregarding others that may present alternative portrayals of Jesus. This approach limits the breadth of understanding and inhibits an open-minded exploration of Jesus' multifaceted identity as presented in different biblical texts.
4. **Dogmatic Formulations:** Classical Christology has historically led to dogmatic formulations that fostered division rather than unity among diverse Christian communities. The intense debates and theological conflicts throughout history

ensued from rigid adherence to and enforcement of dogmatic doctrines, resulting in exclusion, persecution, and violence.

5. An Overemphasis on Theology: Classical Christology approaches Jesus primarily through the lens of systematic theology, sometimes neglecting the significance of historical and cultural studies, anthropology, and other relevant disciplines. This approach limits the potential for a multidisciplinary understanding of Jesus, hindering the exploration of alternative perspectives and insights.

A Historic Alternative to Classical Christology: *Arianism*

Hanns Christof Brennecke, whose credentials include: Lecturer of church history at University Tuebingen, 1988; professor of church history at University Heidelberg, 1988-1989; professor of church history and chair at University Erlangen since 1989; member of the patristische commission Academy D. Wissenschaften, 1995; member of Commission der Griechisch-christe Schriftstells, 1996; vice president, Lutheran Association Patristic Studies, 1999. He states:

‘Arianism,’ as an umbrella term (*Sammelbegriff*) and as a label for particular developments in late-classical Christian theology and doctrine (*Lehrbildung*), has given rise to an abundance of misunderstandings – often conscious and even deliberate misunderstandings. Since late antiquity, the term has been used as a polemical catchword, and the resulting misconceptions have persisted, with astonishing tenacity, up to the present day.⁷

Therefore, it is academically essential and ethically critical to understand Arius’s central premise correctly. Marilyn Dunn, Senior Lecturer in Medieval History at the

⁷ G. M. Berndt, *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed*, ed. R. Steinacher (Routledge, UK: 2014), 1.

University of Glasgow, has written extensively on religion and belief ca. 350-750. Dunn states the following:

Arianism is commonly summed up in two or three phrases: “Arius denied the divinity of Christ” (or “the unity of the Trinity”); Arianism was subordinationist: it made the Son a lesser God than the Father.” But anyone attempting to dig deeper will swiftly become aware of the subject’s complexity and breadth.⁸

Arius’s central premise that created controversy “was the ontological subordination of the Son to the Father or the denial of Jesus Christ being truly divine.”⁹

Arianism teaches that Jesus was a created being, inferior to God the Father. This belittles the role of Jesus in salvation, as Jesus is viewed as a mere creation rather than the divine mediator between God and humanity. This view is based on the interpretation of John 14:28, where Jesus says, “...the Father is greater than I.” Arianism posits that Jesus was the first creation of God. Therefore, Jesus is not equal to God the Father. Therefore, Arianism denies the full divinity of Jesus, which fundamentally differs from the doctrine of the incarnation in classical Christology.

Many clergy hold this lower Christological, Arian view in the American Mainline Protestant Church. Their theological spectrum has historically encompassed a diversity of Christological perspectives, including lower Christologies that challenge traditional understandings of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. These views often emphasize Jesus’ humanity and socio-political significance over traditional notions of His divine preexistence and hypostatic union. Consider, for instance, Rev. Roger Wolsey, an ordained United Methodist pastor who directs the Wesley Foundation at the University of

⁸ Marilyn Dunn, *Arianism* (Leeds, UK: Arc Humanities Press, 2021), 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1p6hqf7>.

⁹ Witchger, “Arianism, Athanasius, and the Effect on Trinitarian Thought,” 4.

Colorado Boulder. His book *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like*

Christianity reflects a progressive Christian framework that view Jesus's divinity in more symbolic terms. Wolsey argues:

I agree with the orthodox Christian doctrine that Jesus was both fully God/Divine and fully human. Yet, I also agree with the Protestant Reformers that we should focus our attention to the benefits of faith in Christ, and minimize technical deliberations concerning the "two natures." The important thing isn't a correct theory concerning Christ's nature, but the conviction that through Jesus, God was revealed as gracious, loving, merciful, liberating, reconciling, and redemptive.¹⁰

Wolsey goes on to state:

Jesus' primary focus wasn't getting individuals to repent from their person sins *per se* – at least not as an end unto itself. He focused on helping human societies break free from their enslavement to unjust worldly systems and powers of domination. Jesus invited people to repent from oppressive worldviews, and to move toward God and God's ways.¹¹

This approach underscores Jesus' role as a human prophet rather than emphasizing His ontological divinity. If he's here to teach us how to be liberated, why does he have to be God?

Similarly, United Methodist Bishop Karen Oliveto, a controversial figure as the first openly gay bishop in the UMC, has made statements suggesting a developmental view of Jesus's self-understanding:

Too many folks want to box Jesus in, carve him in stone, create an idol out of him. But this story cracks the pedestal we've put him on. The wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting one, prince of peace, was as human as you and me. Like you and me, he didn't have his life figured out. He was still growing, maturing, putting the pieces together about who he was and what he was supposed to do. We might think of him as the Rock of Ages, but he was more like a hunk of clay, forming and reforming himself in relation to God. As one person put it: 'Jesus wasn't a know-it-all, he was also learning God's will like any human being and finally he changed his mind...if Jesus didn't have to know it all

¹⁰ Roger Wolsey, *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like Christianity*, (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011), 106.

¹¹ Wolsey, *Kissing Fish*, 108.

innately, but rather could grow into new and deeper understanding through an openness to God's people [even those he formerly discounted], maybe if Jesus could change his mind then maybe so can we!¹²

Critics argue that this interpretation diminishes the orthodox understanding of Christ's preexistent divine nature and unerring mission. After all, divinity cannot grow in understanding or maturity, and it cannot be reformed.

Among United Methodist scholars, Dr. Joerg Rieger stands out for his emphasis on liberation theology. His Christological focus is rooted in the humanity of Jesus and His alignment with the oppressed. In *Christ and Empire*, Rieger writes:

One of the most important similarities between Nicea and Chalcedon, particularly in terms of potential resistance against empire, is in what those councils do not do. Neither gives a precise definition of the coequality of God and Christ, and of Christ and humanity, that would resolve paradox and tension. In this way, they promote some open-endedness where we might least expect it. As a result, they allow those who are not served well by the status quo of empire to perceive that things are not set in stone.¹³

This perspective emphasizes Jesus's role as a social liberator while de-emphasizing metaphysical claims about His divine nature. Those claims are paradoxical and promote open-ended interpretation. A further low view of the Incarnation is professed by Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore, former dean of the Boston University School of Theology. In her work she integrates practical theology with Christology in ways that prioritize relational and experiential dimension of faith. In *Teaching as a Sacramental Act*, she observes:

...*God is incarnate in Jesus and in all creation.* Jesus' life is traditionally understood as the incarnation of God, yet God's wonders are incarnate in many moments of life, as in Madeleine L'Engle, Howard Thurman and his

¹² Mark Tooley, "Lesbian Bishop Oliveto Warns Not to Create Idol of Jesus, Says He Had 'Bigotries and Prejudices,'" *Juicy Ecumenism*, September 15, 2017, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2017/09/15/lesbian-bishop-oliveto-warns-not-create-idol-jesus-says-bigotries-prejudices-updated/>.

¹³ Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 100.

grandmother, John Hull and his son, and Alexander. *Incarnation is the embodiment of God in creation, in every event in which God's purposes are even partially enfleshed.*¹⁴

Scriptural Interpretations in Opposition to Classical Christology

The New Testament writers were not simply reporters of the teachings of Jesus or agreed church doctrine. They were interpreters and described the specialness of Jesus, to which they all bear witness in various ways. They speak of him as the eschatological prophet, the Son of Man, the Messiah. Some envisage him as the embodiment of that pre-existent wisdom of God, of which the Old Testament wisdom literature speaks, or of the Logos of God. At times, this line of thought is developed more personally. They talk of him as God's pre-existent Son coming down to earth. However, according to opponents to classical Christology, all Biblical authors stop short of the assertions that have characterized the later doctrine of the incarnation. At the outset, they claim, the incarnation was one of several ways Christians thought and spoke of Jesus. However, it was the one that was to establish itself as the pattern for all thoughts about Jesus in the later faith of the church.

Two reflections about this process need to be borne in mind. In the first place, the setting in which the process took place was one in which the idea of supernatural divine intervention was a natural category of thought and faith, in a way that is no longer true of the main body, even of convinced believers today. It was within the context of such a general belief in a divine intervention that belief in the specific form of divine intervention, which we know as the incarnation, grew up. Secondly, the later stages of

¹⁴ Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act*, (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), Kindle edition, location 1445 of 6182 (emphasis in original).

that development were greatly influenced by the evidence of the Fourth Gospel understood in a straightforwardly historical way. How else could one interpret a Jesus who said, “Before Abraham was I am” and “My Father and I are one”? Jesus must be either “mad, bad, or God.” However, suppose the Fourth Gospel is less straightforwardly historically understood. In that case, its implications for doctrine may be somewhat different from what they appeared to earlier ages to be. Thus many believe it more reasonable for us to see the doctrine of the incarnation as a later interpretation of Jesus appropriate to the age in which it arose rather than an unalterable truth binding upon all subsequent generations.

The Current Hostile Anti-Classical Christological Belief

Individuals such as John Hick, a philosopher of religion and theologian born in England who taught in the United States for the more significant part of his career, contributed to theodicy, eschatology, and Christology. In the philosophy of religion, he contributed to the epistemology of religion and religious pluralism. He defends pluralism by appeal to illustrations such as the Eucharist in the Middle Ages and inerrancy in the history of Christianity. For example, in the Middle Ages, the Eucharist was understood to involve transforming the consecrated elements into the actual body and blood of Jesus. This was expressed in the doctrine of transubstantiation, and this underlying belief was fundamental to the faith. During the Reformation, some Christians began to affirm the Eucharist without transubstantiation. A second example is the relationship between authority and the inerrancy of scripture. For much of Christian history, the authority of scripture has been understood to reside in its conveying to us otherwise inaccessible knowledge about the nature and the purposes of God. This

knowledge was to be believed because it came to us from God by his authority. How could such a divinely authoritative source be other than entirely true? If its inerrancy were disproved, it would cease to be authoritative.

Today these positions of our forefathers are no longer held by many Christians. There are widely accepted doctrines of the Eucharist which dispense with any conception of a conversion of the elements, such as the doctrine of transubstantiation designed to explicate. Likewise, the authority of scripture is firmly maintained by many who would dissociate themselves from any suggestion of inerrancy. Perhaps views of the incarnation are also not necessary to Christianity. The 1938 Doctrine Report of the Church of England, in acknowledging the divergence of the views about belief in the virgin birth on the power of members of the commission, said that “while both the views outlined above (for and against the virgin birth) are held by members of the Church, the commission, however, fully accepts the reality of our Lord’s incarnation.”¹⁵ Of course, these are only analogies, not exact parallels. They do not prove that “Christianity without incarnation” is viable. However, they take us, many believe, far enough along the road to suggest that the question being raised is proper. Moreover, they believe the case must be heard before judgment is given.

The Opposition's Desire for moving towards a More Inclusive Approach:

To overcome the limitations of classical Christology, many contend it is imperative to adopt a more inclusive and contextually sensitive approach to Christological debates. This approach should encourage engaging with diverse voices,

¹⁵ *Doctrine in the Church of England: The 1938 Report* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 1982), 242.

such as feminist, liberation, and postcolonial theologies, which shed light on the marginalized and oppressed perspectives on Jesus' ministry.

Moreover, an emphasis on historical-critical methodologies can enable scholars to appreciate the nuances of Jesus' life and teachings within his specific historical and cultural context. By contextualizing Jesus' ministry, we can better understand his human nature, interactions with diverse communities, and response to socio-political challenges, whether he is divine or not. Additionally, interfaith dialogue and comparative studies can contribute to a more holistic understanding of Jesus by exploring the different interpretations of his significance within other religious and cultural traditions.

Therefore, while classical Christology has significantly shaped Christian theology throughout history, opposing viewpoints argue against its dogmatic adherence, highlighting its limitations in historical contextualization, inclusivity, and scriptural interpretation. Adopting a more inclusive and multidisciplinary approach to Christology is crucial, advocates reason, so that we can engage with alternative perspectives and explore the richness of historical and cultural diversity to foster a more nuanced understanding of Jesus Christ and his humanity.

In Support of Classical Christology

Classical Christology, or traditional or orthodox Christology, is essential to Christian theology. It is the study of the person and work of Jesus Christ, exploring his nature, relationship with God, and the purpose of his incarnation. This field of study has

been developed by early church fathers, theologians, and scholars for centuries, and it has been essential in shaping Christian beliefs.

The importance of classical Christology lies in its ability to provide a solid foundation for understanding the significance of Jesus Christ. It allows Christians to understand better the divine nature of Jesus and His relationship with the Father. Christology helps Christians understand why Jesus is considered the savior of humanity. Without classical Christology, there would be no clear understanding of Jesus and His significance in Christianity.

One of classical Christianity's most essential is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the belief that Jesus, the Son of God and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, took on human flesh and became a man for the redemption of humanity. It is a belief that Jesus Christ had two natures, fully human and fully divine. It is a fundamental doctrine of Christianity that has been debated and articulated in various ways by theologians, scholars, and philosophers over the centuries.

The theological foundations of the incarnation can be traced back to the early church. Christology in the early church concerned how Jesus was human and divine and how his humanity and divinity were united in one person. These foundations of the incarnation of Jesus Christ were significantly articulated and developed through the ecumenical councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of Christ's dual nature. The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) was pivotal in addressing the Arian controversy, affirming the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, thereby establishing a foundational Christological framework that underscored Jesus' divine nature. This understanding was further developed at the First

Council of Constantinople (381 CE), which expanded the Nicene Creed to include a more robust affirmation of the Holy Spirit's divinity and his role within the Godhead, solidifying the doctrine of the Trinity. The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) took these foundational Christological principles and articulated the doctrine of the hypostatic union, asserting that Jesus Christ is one person in two distinct natures, fully divine and fully human, "without confusion, without change, without division, and separation." This formulation addressed the doctrinal disputes of the time. It provided a coherent theological basis for understanding the incarnation, emphasizing the mystery of how the divine Word became flesh while remaining fully God and man. Collectively, these councils established a comprehensive framework for Christology that continues to influence Christian thought and doctrine today, offering a profound articulation of the mystery of the incarnation as central to the Christian faith.

St. Gregory addresses several aforementioned objections to the incarnation.

Further, in humanity, we see the union of soul and body and an analogy for the union of God with humankind.¹⁶

To address the objection as to how the divine could be united with the human in the incarnation, according to Gregory, this is a mystery, as the union of the soul and body in humans is a mystery. If how the soul is united to the body is unknown, how can the union of divine and human in Christ be within human comprehension? We believe the soul is different from the body because the flesh, apart from the soul, becomes dead and inactive. However, we do not know the manner of union. Likewise, we admit that the divine nature differs from the mortal and transient in its marvelous majesty. However, we

¹⁶ Gregory the Great, *Catechetical Discourse*, 105.

cannot perceive the manner of the union of the divine with the human. However, that God has come to be in human nature, we cannot doubt, because of the recorded wonders of Christ's life. At the same time, we believe that the bodiless and uncreated nature gave all creation substance. We do not examine the whence and how for our faith in these things.¹⁷

According to Gregory, the cause of the divine condescension to our human nature is God's love for humanity and our need for a savior. He argues as follows. If you take away from life the benefits that come from God, you would not be able to say by what means you would recognize the divine. From the good things we experience, we recognize the benefactor; for looking at the things that happened, through these, we reckon the nature of him who is at work in them. Suppose love for humanity is the characteristic property of the divine nature. In that case, you have the cause of God's presence among humans. Our infirm nature needed a healer. Humanity in the fall required someone to set them upright. We who were deprived of life needed the gift of life. We who declined to participate in the good needed him who leads back to the good. We who were shut up in darkness needed the presence of light. The captive sought the redeemer, the one in bondage, the fellow struggler who was held fast in the yoke of slavery, the liberator; were these small and unworthy things to provoke God to descend to visit human nature, since humanity was in so pitiful and wretched a state?¹⁸

Early Church Fathers' Support of Classical Christology

¹⁷ Gregory the Great, *Catechetical Discourse*, 88.

¹⁸ Gregory the Great, *Catechetical Discourse*, 125.

Other early Christian writers, such as Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-107 AD), emphasized the importance of the incarnation in his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, saying, “He was truly born, and truly ate and drank. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified and died in the sight of heaven and earth and the gods and demons. He was truly raised from the dead.”

Another early church father, Irenaeus (c. 130-200 AD), spoke of the unity of Christ’s two natures in his work *Against Heresies*, saying, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love. (Galatians 5:6) Nevertheless, grace belonging to the Father, without doubt, is united to flesh, in virtue of the Word.”¹⁹

The orthodox view of the early church is that Jesus Christ is one person with two distinct natures, one human and one divine. This view is known as the Hypostatic Union, first articulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. According to the Chalcedonian Definition, “We confess that one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, is to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, change, division, or separation. Their union never abolished the distinction between their natures. However, the character proper to the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person and one hypostasis.”²⁰

This view is defended by Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, when remarks: “In Jesus’ own awareness, as we see it in the Gospels, he does not speak and act from

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ed. Robert M. Grant (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 429-431.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 3, Paragraph 1, accessed April 1, 2023, <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p122a3p1.htm>.

himself but from Another: it is of his very essence that he comes from this other. His entire existence is a ‘sending; a ‘mission,’ i.e., a relationship.”²¹ Jesus’ existence as the incarnate Logos through the Incarnation reveals that he is the only perfect mediator between God and humanity; for he is consubstantial with the Father and humankind. Benedict appears to lament that within the collective consciousness of Christianity, an idea that faith in the divinity of Christ is an afterthought. The Incarnation shows that God gave himself in his Only-Begotten Son. If the divinity of Christ is discounted, reduced, or rejected, it also discounts, diminishes and denies the model for the giving so that our relationship may be guided by our giving love freely and the daring realism of divine love. Pope Benedict states:

Incarnation derives from the Latin *incarnatio*. St Ignatius of Antioch – at the end of the first century – and, especially, St Irenaeus used this term in reflecting on the Prologue to the Gospel according to St John, in particular, the sentence “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). Here the word “flesh,” according to the Hebrew usage, indicates man in his whole self, the whole man, but in particular in the dimension of his transience and his temporality, his poverty and his contingency. This was in order to tell us that the salvation brought by God, who became man in Jesus of Nazareth, affects man in his material reality and in whatever situation he may be. God assumed the human condition to heal it from all that separates it from him, to enable us to call him, in his Only-Begotten Son, by the name of “Abba, Father,” and truly to be children of God.²²

Benedict continues, “The Second Vatican Council reasserted this forcefully: “In reality, it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1986), 21-22; and *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007), 340: “At the same time, it also become clear what ‘the Son’ is and what this term means: perfect communion in knowledge, which is at the same time communion in being. Unity in knowing is possible only because it is unity in being.”

²² Benedict XVI, “General Audience of 9 January 2013: He Became a Man,” last modified January 8, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20130109.html.

becomes clear... Christ the new Adam... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling” (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 359).”²³

Scriptural Support of Classical Christology

The doctrine of the incarnation is grounded in the Scriptures. The Gospel of John, in particular, emphasizes the divinity of Christ, beginning with the famous phrase, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This verse underscores the eternal pre-existence of the Word of God, which became flesh in Jesus Christ. Perhaps the most explicit passage in the Bible on the incarnation is the prologue in the Gospel of John, which states: “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This passage clearly indicates the belief that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine.

The teaching of Christ's divinity is not only articulated in the Gospel of John, it is also underscored throughout the synoptic gospels and the Pauline epistles, presenting a unified New Testament witness to the nature of Christ. The Gospel of Luke, for instance, emphasizes the divinity of Christ, as seen in the angel's announcement to Mary: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33). This declaration situates Jesus within the divine plan of salvation, affirming His preeminence and eternal kingship. Furthermore, the Gospel of Mark, considered the earliest of the four gospels, opens with a profound

²³ Benedict XVI, “General Audience of 9 January 2013.”

proclamation of Jesus' identity, stating, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). This succinct introduction not only affirms Jesus' messianic identity but also explicitly ascribes to Him a divine sonship that resonates throughout the narrative.

Additionally, the Pauline epistles provide critical theological insights into the divinity of Christ, particularly in texts such as Colossians 1:15-20, where Paul writes, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." Here, Paul emphasizes Christ's preexistence and creative authority, asserting that all things were created through Him and for Him. Similarly, in Philippians 2:6-11, Paul expounds on the incarnation, indicating that although Christ "was in the form of God," He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. This passage not only highlights the humility of Christ but also affirms His divine nature by referencing His exaltation, in which "every knee should bow" to Him in recognition of His lordship.

Together, these passages from the synoptic gospels and Pauline writings weave a comprehensive theological tapestry that affirms the divinity of Christ, underscoring His unique identity as both fully divine and fully human, a central tenet of Christian doctrine that echoes through the New Testament. This cohesive scriptural witness reinforces the understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Word, whose life, death, and resurrection reveal the nature of God and His redemptive purpose for humanity.

The importance of Classical Christology

Classical Christology is an essential part of Christian theology, providing a foundation for understanding the nature of Jesus Christ, his relationship with God, and the purpose of his incarnation. It also helps Christians understand the role of the Holy

Spirit in empowering believers, leading them in truth, and transforming their lives. The classical Christological view shows that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and how the holy spirit's work in the believer's life is vital.

Classical Christology's doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus Christ has usually been understood to imply the absolute significance of Jesus as a human ideal. Don Cupitt has forcefully made the point in his article *One Jesus, Many Christs?* "Suppose in this life; we have human life as the Son of God lived it." In that case, that must surely give it absolute authority over us as the actual pattern of human living. In practice, we must acknowledge that the types of life men have with complete sincerity thought to be derived from the model of Jesus' life are immensely diverse.

An immense variety of ideals of character have been ostensibly based upon the example of Jesus: a historical man who lived only one life has been made the exemplar of a great range of different forms of life. Jesus has been declared to be a model for hermits, peasants, gentlemen, revolutionaries, pacifists, feudal lords, soldiers and others. Even if we restricted attention to the religious life of men in the Latin West alone, the diversity is great among the ideals of Benedict, Francis, Bruno and Ignatius Loyola.²⁴

Moreover, this is not just a result of human sin and blindness. In a famous phrase R. H. Lightfoot declared that "the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us."²⁵ That may be a somewhat extreme statement of the position. However, it vividly expresses a truth that seems inescapable in the light of scholarly work on the gospels. Even if Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, and his life was humanly perfect, that perfect manhood is not directly available to us as an absolute

²⁴ S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, eds., *In Christ, Faith and History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 137.

²⁵ R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation of the Gospels* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), 225.

authoritative model for our lives. So the significance of Jesus as a model for human life is not directly affected by how his relationship with God is understood. On any showing can the records of his life have absolute significance for us; to which the name of Christian could be given, his life would remain of substantial importance. However, the primary importance of Jesus for Christians has never been as a model for human living. It has resided instead in the conviction that Jesus Christ is the one in whom we meet God, the one through whom God has acted decisively for the world's salvation.²⁶ How, apart from a complete doctrine of the incarnation, could Jesus be the world's savior? Would not any change of the kind imply that the worship of Christ, traditional throughout Christian history, was idolatrous? At this point, the most significant difficulties are likely to be felt.

Karmen MacKendrick notes that: The possibility that God or a manifestation of God has the appearance of a human body is grounded both in Genesis, where God suggests making a human in their image, and Ezekiel's vision of God in something that resembled a human form. Christianity brings this God-manifestation explicitly together with the figure of the Messiah as one who returns, bringing back to the world something it has lost – some form of unity with the divine, by being the divine in the flesh.²⁷

Conclusion

The theological foundations of classical Christology of Jesus Christ within early Christian thought are rooted in historical, biblical, and philosophical foundations. These include the writings of the church fathers, which emphasized the importance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. These biblical passages affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ and

²⁶ Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 22.

²⁷ Karmen MacKendrick, *Material Mystery: The Flesh of the World in Three Mythic Bodies*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2021), 17-20.

the philosophical debates surrounding the nature of Christ in the early church. The doctrine of the incarnation is one of the essential teachings of Christianity. It is a central belief that continues to inspire and challenge the faith and understanding of believers today. Theological reflections on the incarnation provide a lens through which we can better understand the significance of Jesus Christ and his relationship to humanity.

Classical Christology is an essential theological concept in Christianity that has been debated for centuries. Arianism, which posits that Jesus Christ was a created being and not fully divine, contrasts the doctrine of the incarnation. However, through close analysis of scriptural passages and historical theological debates, it is apparent that the doctrine of the incarnation stands up to scrutiny. As Christians, we must continue to defend the doctrine of the incarnation as a vital aspect of our faith. May we continue to explore and grow in our understanding of the incarnation and all it reveals about the nature of God, Yahweh, and the person of Jesus Christ.

Through this project, I hope that I will be able to show how the Incarnation is not just about Jesus alone but about us as well and how errors in our theological understanding of Christ remove the foundation in our faith and lives from which everything else is built upon. Our understanding of who Christ is and who we are in relation to the Incarnation affects how we respond to the call to make the love of God real because we reflect what we believe.

This project aims to examine the theological foundation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ within early Christian thought and apply these understandings to a church that is practicing a low or reduced Christology today in the American Mainline Protestant traditions. Through carefully analyzing the Scriptures and the writings of the church

fathers, this project will explore the theological foundations to support the traditional orthodox understanding of the incarnation against modern presentations of the heresy of Arianism in the American Mainline Protestant Church.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Andragogy: Understanding How Adults Learn

The field of Andragogy centers on the methods and practices of educating adult learners, emphasizing their unique characteristics and needs. Andragogy within the discipline of education considers the technique and practice of teaching adult learners, otherwise known as adult education. My project will be presented as a short-term class to adult learners. Therefore, as a basis, it will be vital to understand how adults learn differently than children. Research cited in this paper indicates that adults tend to be more self-directed, which means that, in many cases, they tend to be more internally motivated. This section explores the principles of Andragogy, which Malcolm Knowles developed.

Andragogy vs. Pedagogy: Adult vs. Child

To fully understand and comprehend the andragogical principles or assumptions, it is essential to understand the pedagogical assumptions that differ between andragogy and pedagogy (teaching children). As elucidated by Gehring in 2000 and Ozuah in 2005, pedagogical theory underscores five essential elements. These include the limited life experiences of children, their dependency on external factors, such as their self-concept,

the role of external motivation, content-centric learning, and the readiness of children to learn. Because children have relatively short lifespans, they often lack the opportunity to accumulate extensive life experiences or engage in numerous developmental tasks. Within pedagogy, teachers sometimes mistakenly perceive children's experiences as irrelevant and inconsequential (as noted by Ozuah in 2005).¹

This understanding means that children must rely on their teachers and other adults for guidance to fill the void and provide information to create a frame of reference for them to build their learning. This means children are understood as externally motivated to reach goals set by teachers and other adults such as their parents.

On the other hand, Knowles' theory of andragogy is based on the distinctions in learning between adults and children. It posits that as individuals mature and age, their self-concept becomes less reliant on external influences and more self-directed. Simultaneously, they amass a wealth of valuable life experiences, which serve as valuable learning resources and as reference points to connect with and build upon new knowledge (as highlighted by Lee in 1998 and Merrian in 2001).²

Definition and Origins

Definition of Adults: Adults are "individuals who have attained the chronological and legal status of adulthood, with all the rights and responsibilities it entails."³ Most adult education literature assumes this is when one reaches age-twenty-five. According to

¹ Wendy Conaway, "Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All? A Study to Determine the Applicability of Andragogical Principles to Adult Learners of All Ages" (PhD diss., Walden University, 2010), 32.

² Conaway, "Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?", 34.

³ Conaway, "Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?", 44.

Knowles, the psychological definition of an adult is when an individual arrives at a self-concept of being responsible for their own life, of being self-directed.⁴

Origins of Andragogy: The term “Andragogy” is derived from the Greek words “Andros” (adult man) and “Agos” (I guide). Wendy Conway’s observation reveals that although adult learning and education have only recently gained formal recognition, their principles can be traced back to the teaching strategies and philosophies of ancient thinkers like Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato. These ancient philosophers primarily imparted knowledge to adults who sought enlightenment to improve their social role and identities. The Socratic method, characterized by problem-solving and encouraging self-directed learning, emerged from recognizing the importance of learner-centered approaches over subject-centered ones. Additionally, andragogical concepts find their roots in the teachings of Hebrew and Greek educators, as seen in the specific terminology used when discussing adult education, including terms like learn, teach, instruct, guide, lead, and example.⁵

Malcolm Knowles, inspired by the work of the Yugoslavian adult educator Dusan Savicevic, American psychologist and educator John Dewey, and American philosopher Eduard Lindeman, developed Andragogy as a theory of adult learning. Knowles acknowledged the existence of knowledge and experience in adult learners and viewed the role of the instructor as a facilitator and guide. In this view, the learner, not the subject matter, is central to the process. He based the assumptions for his new theory of adult learning, or the art and science of helping adults learn, on the premise that adults

⁴ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 3rd ed. (Houston, TX: Gulf Pub. Co., Book Division, 1984), 27-63.

⁵ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 22.

learn differently from children. The European concept of Andragogy means the art and science of helping adults. It directly contrasts pedagogy, which can be defined as the art and science of helping children learn. There are six principle assumptions of Andragogy; initially, there were four. However, Knowles refined his approach through several publications.

Principles of Andragogy

Andragogy is grounded in several key assumptions:

Self-Directedness: As individuals mature, they become increasingly self-directed, taking responsibility for their own decisions. Adults have a psychological need for self-direction and resist attempts to limit it. The first principle assumption of Andragogy is self-directedness. As a person matures, their self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality to a self-directing individual. Self-directed implies that others do not influence a person and they take responsibility for their own decisions. Knowles believes that adults also develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others as capable of self-direction.⁶ According to Knowles, the definition of is one who has achieved a self-concept of having complete responsibility for one's own life and being self-directing.⁷ He suggests "that adults are psychologically driven toward self-directedness, and resent or even resist attempt to limit their ability to be self-directed (Fall, 2001; Knowles, 1980;

⁶ Malcolm Knowles, *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 58-78.

⁷ D. Pratt, "Andragogy As A Related Construct," in *Adult Education Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1988): 160-181, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001848188038003004>.

Lee, 1998; Prat, 1988).”⁸ The implications for practice are an “adult-friendly learning climate (physical and psychological). Providing planning, self-diagnostic, and self-evaluation experience.”⁹ Self-examination includes “exploring feelings such as fear, anger, guilt, shame or helplessness.”¹⁰ If observed by the class facilitator, such examination could reveal the depth of feeling concerning the subject matter and provide information for the instructor concerning what motivates the participant.

Experience: Adults accumulate rich life experiences that serve as a learning resource. These experiences can inspire or hinder learning, with social contexts playing a significant role. The second principle assumption of Andragogy is experience. Adults accumulate a growing reservoir of experience, a rich learning resource. This experience acts as a catalyst to inspire learning but can also hinder learning. “Life experiences that begin to accumulate at birth and continue throughout infancy and childhood are perceived simply as occurrences, not opportunities for learning or shaping identity.”¹¹ However, this is not the case with adults, as their experiences are more associated with social roles, social identity, and expectations. “More specifically, the social, occupational, psychosocial, and family contexts in life situations in which experiences occur create and promote learning opportunities for adults by orienting current and prior experiences to life, developmental tasks, and expectations (Beder 7 Darkenwald, 1982; Knowles, 1984;

⁸ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 35-36.

⁹ Sharan B. Merrian, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006), 120.

¹⁰ James P. Pappas and Jerry Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 148* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015), 33.

¹¹ Conway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 37.

Zmeyov, 1998).”¹² Adult experiences provide a basis for new learning and an awareness of needs that the current knowledge base does not cover. “In other words, where current experiences fall short, adults recognize the need to encounter new experiences for growth and are ready to learn what they need to know.”¹³ The implications for practice include “Emphasis on experiential techniques and practical application. Unfreezing and learning to learn from experience.”¹⁴

Readiness to Learn: Adults are motivated to learn when life events or changes create uncertainty, requiring them to acquire new knowledge and skills. Third, the readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of their social roles. Adults commonly seek out learning programs when life or work situations suggest a need to understand something new or when a change promotes uncertainty. “As individuals mature, lifestyle changes and choices must be made in response to social roles and responsibilities as spouses, parents, employees, etc. (Davenport & Davenport, 1984; Laher, 2007; Lee, 1998).”¹⁵ These changes and specific life events, such as births, marriages, deaths, and divorce, also drive adults’ readiness to learn. For adults to cope with life situations, tasks must be able to be completed. “Successful achievement of the task leads to happiness and enhanced self-efficacy, whereas failure leads to unhappiness,

¹² Conway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 37.

¹³ Conway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 40.

¹⁴ Merriam, *Learning in Adulthood*, 120.

¹⁵ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 40.

societal disapproval, and diminished self-efficacy.”¹⁶ The implications for practice include “providing proper timing of learning and grouping of learners.”¹⁷

Problem-Centered Learning: Adult learners are more interested in problem-centered learning, focusing on immediate application rather than abstract subject matter. Fourth, adult’s learning orientation transitions from subject-centered to problem-centered, relevant to their current life situations. There is a change in time perspective as people mature, from the future application of knowledge to the immediacy of application. Thus, and adult is more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning. Adults generally like to see the use of what they are learning so that the new understanding can be applied to solving some task or problem.

Intrinsic Motivation: As they age, adults are primarily motivated by internal factors, such as personal growth and development. Fifth, adults possess and act upon intrinsic motivation. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external. “Horton (1996) suggested that although some adult learners approach learning for the sake of learning, most adults approach it as a means toward enhancing quality of life (Tice, 1997).”¹⁸ Additionally, “Justice (1997) observed that after age forty, the need for learning shifts as motivation decreases for vocational purposes and increases toward personal growth and development.”¹⁹ An implication for practice is, “The instructor

¹⁶ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 40.

¹⁷ Merriam, *Learning in Adulthood*, 120.

¹⁸ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 41-42.

¹⁹ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 42.

should recognize the adult learner's reasons for coming to the learning event: asking what brought them to the learning event.”²⁰

Building upon the argument for the predominance of intrinsic motivation in adult learners, it is essential to recognize the nuanced interplay between internal and external factors in driving behavior. While proponents, such as myself, emphasize the growing significance of intrinsic motivations with ages, it is crucial to acknowledge that external facts may still exert influence, albeit to a lesser degree. For instance, practical considerations such as career advancement or financial incentives may initially prompt adults to engage in learning activities. However, as individuals progress through adulthood, their priorities often shift towards more intrinsic pursuits, such as personal growth and self-actualization. Therefore, while intrinsic motivations may become the primary drivers of adult learning, educators must remain cognizant of the multifaceted nature of motivation and tailor instructional approaches accordingly. By balancing the recognition of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, instructors can create learning environments that effectively cater to the diverse needs and aspirations of adult learners, ultimately fostering holistic development and lifelong learning.

Relevance: Adults need to understand the relevance of what they're learning and how it applies to real-world problems. Adults need to know why they need to learn something. “For adults to learn, the relevance of what is being learned must be clear and unambiguous.”²¹ Adults need to relate the content of their learning to real-world problems before undertaking to learn. “Often, adults are unaware that they need to know

²⁰ Merriam, *Learning in Adulthood*, 120.

²¹ Jonathan Tummons and Sharon Powell, *A-Z of Lifelong Learning* (Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 15.

information to achieve the task or succeed in their goals, and it becomes the responsibility of the facilitator to raise awareness of what is necessary to know to fulfill the requirements for the task (Knowles, 1990).²² Therefore, “The instructor should provide a rationale for the course objectives and activities.”²³

Implications for Practice

These assumptions have practical implications:

Creating an Adult-Friendly Environment: Providing a supportive, psychologically safe learning climate is crucial. Educators should prioritize establishing a supportive and psychologically safe learning environment. This ensures that adult learners feel comfortable and encouraged to participate actively in the learning process.

Facilitating Self-Examination: Encouraging learners to explore their feelings and motivations, such as fear or guilt, can deepen their understanding of the subject matter. Encouraging adult learners to delve into their feelings and motivations, such as fear or guilt, can enhance their comprehension of the subject matter. This introspective approach fosters deeper learning and personal growth.

Recognizing Learner Motivations: Instructors should inquire about why adults attend a learning even to tailor the experience effectively. Instructors need to understand why adult learners choose to engage in a learning activity. Tailoring the learning

²² Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 41.

²³ Merriam, *Learning in Adulthood*, 120.

experience to align with these motivations enhances relevance and effectiveness, ultimately optimizing the learning outcomes for adult participants.

Focused Factors in Religious Learning:

Creating a Sacred and Respectful Environment: In religious learning contexts, it's crucial to establish an atmosphere that respects the sacredness of the subject matter and promotes open dialogue while ensuring psychological safety for all participants.

Facilitating Spiritual Reflection: Encouraging learners to explore their spiritual beliefs, experiences, and emotions can deepen their understanding of religious teachings and foster a more profound connection to their faith.

Recognizing Personal Religious Journey: Instructors should acknowledge that individuals engage in religious learning for various reasons, including spiritual growth, community connection, or personal transformation. Tailoring the learning experience to accommodate these diverse motivations can enhance engagement and relevance.

Transformative Learning: A Critical Approach to Adult Education

Transformative Learning is another essential theory in adult education that focuses on profound shifts in learners' perspective and assumptions. This section outlines the key elements of this theory.

Definition and Origin

Definition: Transformative Learning is how adults critically examine and modify their fundamental assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. It results in a fundamental change in perspective.

Origin: Jack Mezirow introduced Transformative Learning in 1978. It centers on the learner's ability to identify and reevaluate their assumptions.

Core Theories of Transformative Learning

Transformative Learning draws from four primary theories:

Self-Directed Learning: Learners make decisions about context, methods, resources, and evaluation, particularly valuable for motivated, resource-rich individuals. The first principal assumption of Andragogy is self-directedness. As a person matures, their self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality to a self-directing individual. Self-directed implies that others do not influence a person and take responsibility for their own decisions. Knowles believes that adults also develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others as capable of self-direction.²⁴ According to Knowles, the definition of an adult is one who has achieved a self-concept of having complete responsibility for one's own life and being self-directing.²⁵ He suggests "that adults are psychologically driven toward self-directedness, and resent or even resist attempts to limit their ability to be self-directed (Fall, 2001; Knowles, 1980; Lee, 1998;

²⁴ Knowles, *Andragogy in Action*, 120.

²⁵ Pratt, "Andragogy as a Related Construct," 160-181.

Prat, 1988).”²⁶ The implications for practice are an “adult-friendly learning climate (physical and psychological). Providing planning, self-diagnostic, and self-evaluation experiences.”²⁷ Self-examination includes “exploring feelings such as fear, anger, guilt, shame or helplessness.”²⁸ If observed by the class facilitator, such examination could reveal the depth of feeling concerning the subject matter and provide information for the instructor concerning what motivates the participant. Self-directed learning can be understood as the theory that focuses on the individual learner who “makes the decision about content, methods, resources, and evaluation of the learning.”²⁹ This is practiced by motivated individual learners who have access to resources. This method can be much more challenging for learners with low literacy or limited resource access.

Humanist Theory: Developed by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, this theory emphasizes personal growth and self-actualization as the highest learning goals. Abraham Maslow is known for the “hierarchy of needs” concept. Carl Rogers is known for his work exploring the relationships between teachers and students. Rogers states, “Human beings can control their own destiny; people are inherently good and will strive for a better world; people are free to act, and behavior is the consequence of human choice; people possess unlimited potential for personal growth and development.”³⁰ According to

²⁶ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 36.

²⁷ Merriam, *Learning in Adulthood*, 120.

²⁸ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 33.

²⁹ David Corley, *Adult Learning Theories: Fact Sheet No. 11* (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy [TEAL] Center, 2014), 2, https://teal.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Adult_Learning_Theories_Fact_Sheet_No._11.pdf.

³⁰ Paul Belanger, *Theories in Adult Learning and Education*, 1st ed. (Opladen, UK: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2011), 35-40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbkjx77>.

a humanist approach, personal growth and self-actualization are the highest possible learning outcomes/goals.

Experiential Learning: The third theory, Experiential Learning, posits that all learning begins with experience. Individuals reflect on their actions or experiences to learn. This approach highly values the past life experience an adult learner brings. These theorists link cognition and learning to the context of the learner by referring to “the notions of situated or embodied cognition.”³¹ This theory asserts that learning starts with experience and values the past experiences of adult learners. The second principle assumption of Andragogy is experience. Adults accumulate a growing reservoir or experience, a rich learning resource. This experience acts as a catalyst to inspire learning but can also hinder learning. “Life experience that begin to accumulate at birth and continue throughout infancy and childhood are perceived simply as occurrences, not opportunities for learning or shaping identity.”³² However, this is not the case with adults, as their experiences are more associated with social roles, social identity, and expectations. “More specifically, the social, occupational, psychosocial, and family contexts in life situations in which experience occur create and promote learning opportunities for adults by orienting current and prior experiences to life, developmental tasks, and expectations (Beder 7 Darkenwald, 1982; Knowles, 1984; Zmeyov, 1998).”³³ Adult experiences provide a basis for new learning and an awareness of needs that the current knowledge base does not cover. “In other words, where current experience falls

³¹ Belanger, *Theories in Adult Learning and Education*, 42.

³² Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 37.

³³ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 37.

short, adults recognize the need to encounter new experiences for growth and are ready to learn what they need to know.”³⁴ The implications for practice include “Emphasis on experiential techniques and practical application. Unfreezing and learning to learn from experience.”³⁵

Transformative Learning Theory: Mezirow critically examines learners’ assumptions, leading to a more inclusive, self-reflective perspective. “Transformative learning induces a more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences that shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner’s subsequent experiences.”³⁶ Mezirow defined Transformative Learning as “a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize, reassess, and modify the structures of assumptions and expectations that frame our tacit points of view and influence our thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.”³⁷ Mezirow focuses on the process of identifying individuals’ assumptions and critically examining them. Mezirow explains how, over time, adult learners construct “a coherent body of experience – associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their lifeworld. He suggests how transformative learning is the process of effecting a change in one of these frames of reference, claiming that when circumstances allow, “learners move toward a frame of

³⁴ Conaway, “Andragogy: Does One Size Fit All?”, 40.

³⁵ Merriam, *Learning in Adulthood*, 120.

³⁶ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

³⁷ Jack Mezirow and Edward W. Taylor, *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 18, accessed October 25, 2024, <http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780470605431>.

reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.”³⁸

Frames of reference, which can also be defined as meaning perspectives, Pappas defines as structures of assumptions that serve as the framework through which we interpret and make sense of our experiences. They selectively define our expectations, perceptions, thought processes, and emotional responses. Mezirow further indicates that individuals often transition between different mental or behavioral activities without deliberate consideration once these structures are established. Consequently, they resist ideas deviating from their pre-existing beliefs and expectations.”³⁹

It becomes essential to subject them to critical examination to facilitate a shift in frames of reference or meaning perspectives among adult learners. These meaning perspectives encompass what Mezirow calls “habits of mind” and the resulting “points of view.” They consist of several elements, including higher-order schemata like theories, beliefs, cultural norms, goal orientations, and assessments, forming a network of arguments. Additionally, they involve habits of expectation, automatic reactions, presuppositions, value judgments, stereotypes, and learning styles. These perspectives also encompass the distinct ways we interpret our experiences, many of which are acquired uncritically during childhood through socialization.⁴⁰

Transformative learning has emerged as the most widely researched and expansive theory in adult education across North America. Per Mezirow’s explanation of

³⁸ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

³⁹ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

⁴⁰ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32-33.

the different types of learning theories – empirical, analytical, and reconstructive – transformative learning appears to be the most promising for the hypothesis of this project, as it caters to learners who seek to grow in faith and confidence amidst understanding the essence of Christ, the nature of human communication, and cognitive, moral, and linguistic development. This theory primarily focuses on adult education, targeting adult educators as its primary audience. As a reconstructive theory, it aims to establish a general, abstract, and idealized model that can explain the learning process's dimensions, dynamics and generic structure.⁴¹

Strategies for Transformative Learning

Transformative learning, a process characterized by profound shifts in understanding and perspective, is facilitated through various strategic approaches. These strategies outlined by Seth Nelson, drawn from James E. Loder's work on *Educational Ministry in the Logic of the Spirit*, serve as effective frameworks for fostering such transformative experiences. Conflictual learning, the first strategy, engages learners in real-world problems, promoting the development of conflict-resolution skills and critical thinking. By encouraging dialogue and reflection on theological debates and contemporary issues, learners not only diagnose conflicts but also cultivate sensitivity and contextual understanding. Contemplative wonder, the second strategy, creates space for reflection and connection with subject matter, deepening engagement and fostering spiritual attunement. Through practices like silence, critical reflection, and dialogue, learners develop reasoning skills and explore virtue in community discussions, thus

⁴¹ Mezirow and Taylor, *Transformative Learning in Practice*, 21.

connecting theory with practical application. Facilitators play a crucial role in orchestrating meaningful dialogues that transcend mere opinion exchange, ensuring that learning experiences provoke substantial and wide-ranging discourse. Sharing convictional experiences, the third strategy, bridges head-to-heart connections by fostering openness and trust through personal storytelling. Such experiences facilitate emulation, motivation, and determination among learners, enabling them to openly acknowledge shortcomings and seek support. Celebrating “aha” moments, the fourth strategy, prompts learners to reflect on key takeaways and encourages reflective application of new concepts to real-life contexts. Finally, interpretation and action emphasize applying new ideas to practice, shifting the focus from demonstrating knowledge to transformative application. In essence, these strategies underscore the importance of intentional and multifaceted approaches in cultivating transformative learning experiences that resonate beyond the classroom.

An outline of the five key strategies that enhance transformative learning:

A key strategy for effective redemptive transformational learning involves interpretation and action. Seth Nelson draws five strategies for shaping learning experiences from the work of James E. Loder entitled *Educational Ministry in the Logic of the Spirit*.

Conflictual Learning: Engage learners in real-world problems, encouraging them to develop conflict-resolution skills. This type of learning can include “inviting students to propose real-world and ministry problems related to the topic. It could harness contemporary/historical events and national/world crises as moments for learning. Given

the impact of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, there is no shortage of theological debates, many of which do not produce any defined answers. The hope is “that learners develop abilities to [diagnose] critical conflicts and handle them with sensitivity.”⁴² In Oxenham’s argument, emphasizing dialogical approaches over didactic methods improves the contextualization of moral obligations while steering clear of indoctrination. An example of this is when students collaborate to recognize universal virtues and vices within their specific situations, engaging in conversations about the idiosyncrasies of their cultures, age groups, and social backgrounds.⁴³

Contemplative Wonder: Create opportunities for reflection and contemplation, allowing learners to connect with the subject matter more deeply. The facilitator or instructor of the class/course leaves time for pause and thought instead of speaking into every moment of silence in the class context. In the context of the church, this not only provides a place for individuals taking a course to reflect on the material being presented but also allows them an opportunity to attune themselves to the still-speaking small voice of the Holy Spirit. By “practicing silent, critical reflection, slower-paced dialogue, and *lectio divina*,” this strategy is put into play within the class context and utilized to its maximum potential. Additional activities within the class setting that can enhance this strategic application further are “small group brainstorming and wondering sessions, spiritual retreats, and field trips which engage artistic expression or outdoor enjoyment of

⁴² Rev. S. J. Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning for Ministry and Theological Education, Part 2,” *Christian Education Journal* 19.1 (2022): 9-31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891320980454>.

⁴³ Marvin Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education: An Academic Epistolary Novel* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2019), 346.

creation.”⁴⁴ This type of dialogical activity engages the participants, students, in *phronesis*. Students must cultivate their reasoning skills related to virtue, which can be achieved through community discussions. It’s essential to allow students to face challenges collectively in small groups, where they can explore real-life situations where virtue is relevant and can be put into practice. Strategies like organizing debates and focus groups centered on conflicting virtues, presenting case studies that highlight the balancing act of virtues, or conducting brainstorming sessions to create an ethical framework that identifies flaw and excesses in virtue are all valuable. However, this doesn’t imply that teachers should altogether avoid lecturing; instead, lectures should serve as a starting point to ignite meaningful dialogues.⁴⁵

Creating learning environments where substantial and purposeful dialogues occur is demanding for educators. They must skillfully orchestrate significant discussions, meticulously select thought-provoking questions, provide relevant discussion materials, and pinpoint critical issues that encourage deep and wide-ranging conversations. Ensuring that these dialogues transcend mere exchanges of opinions and delve into substantial and meaningful discourse is essential. It is the responsibility of the teacher to facilitate this.⁴⁶

Sharing Convictional Experiences: Facilitators share their deep and personal experiences, fostering a head-to-heart connection. The person facilitating the class shares

⁴⁴ Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 16.

⁴⁵ Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education*, 346-347.

⁴⁶ Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education*, 53.

open and deep convictional experiences with the course participants. “Loder calls this ‘learning from convictional experiences or from insights that reach the proportions of convictional significance.’”⁴⁷ This transforms the class from a simple head-to-head connection into a head-to-heart connection. “Convictional learning seeks to bridge the gap of *studying* God as *object* with *loving* God as *subject*.”⁴⁸ This strategy might play out in the course as opportunities for worship and/or may spontaneously occur.

Engaging in dialogue provides students with a platform to express their experiences and growth in virtue. When employed effectively, group discussions strengthen students’ inclination for emulation, motivation, and determination. Within these group settings, students can delve into topics such as the results of their efforts to incorporate virtuous behavior into their lives and the challenges they face while applying theological concepts. Moreover, these dialogues create an environment where individuals can openly acknowledge their shortcomings and seek peer support and prayers.⁴⁹

It is essential for teachers to actively participate in these dialogues, fostering an atmosphere of openness and trust. When conducted in this manner, conversation becomes an ingrained practice in which students develop and exercise civic, democratic, and relational virtues as an integral part of their learning experience.⁵⁰

Dialogue gives students an opportunity to share about their personal journeys in virtue. Used in this way, group dialogue reinforces emulation, motivation, and

⁴⁷ Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 16.

⁴⁸ Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 16 (emphasis original).

⁴⁹ Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education*, 347.

⁵⁰ Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education*, 347.

determination. Groups may discuss, for example, the outcomes of their habituation practices or the difficulties encountered in working out some of the theories. This is also an opportunity to confess failure and to receive support and prayer. Teachers should participate openly in this sort of dialogue in a climate of openness and trust. Used in this way, dialogue becomes habituated practice in its own right in which civic, democratic, and relational virtues are practiced.⁵¹

Celebrating “Aha” Moments: Encourage learners to reflect on and name critical takeaways from the learning experience. The fourth strategy is to celebrate “aha” moments. It is essential to “give time for learners to reflect and name ‘aha’ moments of learning, those key takeaways students will want to inculcate in their lives.”⁵²

Interpretation and Action: Focus on applying new concepts to real-life contexts, emphasizing reflective application. “Transformative learning induces a more far reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences that shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner’s subsequent experiences.”⁵³

This strategy focuses less on students’ ability to demonstrate new facts and more on applying new ideas to their context and practices. “The goal is for learners to become reflective practitioners in pastoral ministry or wise disciples in their everyday lives, people who contextually apply their learning in theologically reflective ways.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education*, 347.

⁵² Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 17.

⁵³ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

⁵⁴ Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 17.

Interpretation of transformative learning “demonstrates the original conflict, dilemma, or problem has been coherently addressed, and corresponds to how Scripture informs, and their Christian tradition considers, the issue at hand.”⁵⁵ Pappas and Jerman expound on the concept of transformative learning:

Transformative learning, therefore, extends other forms of learning in that it creates significant changes in learners’ fundamental assumptions about themselves; plus, these changes are generally more profound than the learning outcomes achieved in the single or double loop learning process discussed by Argyris and Schon (1978).⁵⁶

It is important to understand that transformative learning is not a phenomenon that excludes instrumental or communicative learning. “Rather, a process of transformative learning can be facilitated as a consequence of instrumental or communicative learning.”⁵⁷ In other words, “a process of emancipatory learning, of shift in perspective leading to a new and critical understanding of the social, political and/or cultural context in which the learner finds her or himself, can be begun through any other programme of learning, whether it is a course for car mechanics or and English literature course.”⁵⁸

Application to Christian Education

Incorporating Andragogy and Transformative Learning principles into Christian education can be highly beneficial. This section explores the application of these theories in a local church context, particularly in teaching the orthodox understanding of Classical

⁵⁵ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

⁵⁶ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

⁵⁷ Tummons and Powell, *A-Z of Lifelong Learning*, 143.

⁵⁸ Tummons and Powell, *A-Z of Lifelong Learning*, 143.

Christology with a focus on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. “The goal is for learners to become reflective practitioners in pastoral ministry or wise disciples in their everyday lives, people who contextually apply their learning in theologically reflective ways.”⁵⁹

Interpretation of transformative learning “demonstrates the original conflict, dilemma, or problem has been coherently addressed, and corresponds to how Scripture informs, and their Christian tradition considers, the issue at hand.”⁶⁰

Transformative learning goes beyond conventional learning approaches, leading to substantial shifts in learners’ core self-perceptions. These shifts tend to be more profound than the learning outcomes associated with the single- or double-loop learning processes outlined by Argyris and Schon in 1978.⁶¹

Pappas and Jerman expound on the concept of transformative learning by going on to state that it is essential to understand that transformative learning is not a phenomenon that excludes instrumental or communicative learning. “Rather, a transformative learning process can be facilitated as a consequence of instrumental or communicative learning.”⁶² In other words, a process of emancipatory learning, of a shift in perspective leading to a new and critical understanding of the social, political and/or cultural context in which the learner finds her or himself, can be begun through any other program of learning, regardless of the discipline being presented and taught.⁶³

⁵⁹ Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 17.

⁶⁰ Nelson, “Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2,” 17.

⁶¹ Pappas and Jerman, *Transforming Adults Through Coaching*, 32.

⁶² Tummons and Powell, *A-Z of Lifelong Learning*, 143.

⁶³ Tummons and Powell, *A-Z of Lifelong Learning*, 143.

Discipleship and Transformation: Christian education aims to create disciples who acquire knowledge and internalize Christ's teachings. This process involves modeling, explanation, legitimization, and application (MELA). Members of the church are seeking to be disciples of Jesus Christ. A disciple can be understood to be a student following a teacher and wishing to emulate them in every way, just as the disciples and apostles of Jesus followed him throughout the scriptural accounts. Therefore, disciples are students who seek to acquire much more than simply static information. They seek to internalize the teacher's very being, essence, in some way. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ and learning in and through the church's resources requires more than a simple exchange of information, as discipleship involves much more than defining terminologies or facts, but a complete commitment to following Jesus Christ by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The acronym MELA describes a four-step model for this kind of role modeling. Educators begin by modeling (M) virtues, selecting those that resonate with them, and explaining why they find them suitable. Subsequently, they embark (E) on illustrating how they've personally enacted these virtues by stepping into the role themselves. The next step involves legitimizing (L) and providing justifications for their choice of virtue, relevance to specific situations, and intended outcomes. Lastly, educators actively apply (A) these virtues by equipping and motivating others to cultivate and integrate them into their own lives.⁶⁴

Challenges in Christian Education: The challenges confronting the wider Christian movement in America concerning Christian discipleship formation are

⁶⁴. Oxenham and International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education*, 345.

emblematic of broader societal shifts towards secularization and individualism. As articulated in the context of Challenges in Christian Education, the imperative for the church extends beyond mere acquisition of information towards the transformation of believers in response to God's grace. Despite concerted efforts such as forming discipleship bands and class meetings, the prevailing cultural ethos of emotive individualism, compounded by hedonistic tendencies, poses formidable obstacles to this transformative process. The urgency of redemptive transformational learning becomes evident in addressing these challenges, as articulated in Transitional Learning theory, which acknowledges the complexities of adult life and underscores the potential for aligning one's cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions with the reality of God's kingdom.

Central to the predicament facing the church is the prevailing misconception among Christians that the gospel culminates in a singular event of faith, often reduced to securing forgiveness and a heavenly reward. This truncated understanding neglects the essential aspect of profound transformation inherent in the gospel message, where believers are called to undergo a radical reorientation of their lives in response to God's love. Consequently, the failure to grasp the transformative potential of the gospel perpetuates a cycle wherein believers remain ensnared in habitual sin and fail to embody the values of God's kingdom. Thus, the challenge lies not merely in imparting doctrinal knowledge but in nurturing a deep and abiding faith that translates into tangible transformation, fostering a genuine alignment of character and conduct with the realities of God's redemptive work.

The church attempts to form discipleship bands and class meetings that foster a transformation from who we once were into the rebirth and renewal of whom God is recreating and cleansing us to be. Transformative learning can assist in this process as the Transitional Learning theory “acknowledges the challenges of adult life and sees those challenges as opportunities that can align our thinking, feeling, and dealing with current reality more fully. Christ’s followers seek to align their character and conduct with the reality of God’s kingdom.”⁶⁵ The need and process of redemptive transformational learning are clear. Nevertheless, the church continues to struggle to teach even the basics of the Christian faith and biblical worldview, such as Classical Christology and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, to most believers.

The church faces challenges in nurturing individuals who embrace faith in Jesus and progress toward becoming dedicated disciples. This difficulty arises from a prevalent belief among Christians that the gospel primarily involves a single event where they place their faith in Jesus. In this view, Jesus grants forgiveness and secures a place in heaven as a reward. Unfortunately, this perspective has led to a misinterpretation of the gospel, where people receive forgiveness but do not experience profound transformation. Consequently, they persist in their old ways, embracing sin and its consequences instead of undergoing a profound change through God’s love and learning to love God in return.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ellen L. Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory: Connections with Christian Adult Education,” *Christian Educational Journal* 10, no. 2 (2013): 430, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000212>.

⁶⁶ Kevin M. Watson and Scott T. Kisker, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2017), 8.

Dr. Kevin M. Watson and Dr. Scott T. Kisker utilize a Wesleyan, or Methodist, lens to view the issue:

The church struggles with helping people who come to faith in Jesus become deeply committed disciples. One reason is that for many Christians, the gospel is a one-time transaction where you put your faith in Jesus, and he rewards you by forgiving you and giving you a ticket to heaven. This account has often resulted in a distortion of the gospel, where people are forgiven but otherwise unchanged, continuing to love and serve the ways of sin and death instead of being transformed by God's love and learning to love God.⁶⁷

Transformation is the synergistic interplay of divine grace and human agency. As recipients of God's saving and redeeming grace, parishioners are called to respond by actively engaging in the process of transformation. This entails deepening their understanding and affection for the Triune God – Father, Son (embodied in the Incarnate Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit – and aligning their thoughts and actions with the commandments of Scripture, particularly the mandate to love one another. Indeed, the essence of transformation lies in the realization of the gospel message – the profound truth that through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has extended the offer of rescue and redemption to humanity, thereby offering hope and restoration from our fallen state and inherent human condition. Thus, transformation becomes not merely a personal journey but also a communal proclamation of the good news, embodying the transformative power of God's grace working in concert with human cooperation.

Redemptive Transformational Learning: Applying transformative learning strategies, including conflictual learning, contemplative wonder, sharing convictional experiences, celebrating “aha” moments, and interpreting and acting, can equip believers

⁶⁷ Watson and Kisker, *The Band Meeting*, 8.

to understand and live out the orthodox understanding of Classical Christology, especially in regards to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

This interdisciplinary exploration shapes the practical application of educational theories for local churches. Shaping this project, and hopefully many church education ministries in the future, the literature in the field seems to highlight six core elements of Transformative learning: valuing individual student experiences, both prior experiences and the experience of the class in which they are currently enrolled, promoting critical reflection, incorporating dialogical education, having a holistic orientation to teaching which includes affection and rationality, having an awareness of context including the context of the learner's life and societal context and the environmental context of the class, and finally, cultivating authentic relationships with students.⁶⁸

These strategies inspire hope that effectively teaching an orthodox theological understanding of Classical Christology focusing on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in the local church will equip believers to navigate the myriads of low Christological views and distortions, misunderstandings, and rejections on the reality of the dual nature of Jesus Christ and truly offer them an opportunity for redemptive transformation.

Redemptive transformation stands as the cornerstone of this interdisciplinary endeavor, serving as its guiding principle and central focus. At its essence, redemptive transformation encapsulates the process whereby individuals undergo profound change, not merely in outward behavior but in the very core of their being, as they are redeemed and restored through divine grace. This concept transcends disciplinary boundaries, resonating within the realms of theology, psychology, education, and beyond. Within this

⁶⁸ Nelson, "Redemptive Transformational Learning, Part 2," 10.

interdisciplinary context, redemptive transformation emerges as the linchpin that unites diverse fields of study under a common framework, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between personal growth, spiritual renewal, and societal change. By recognizing the transformative power of redemption and the collaborative interplay between human agency and the divine intervention, this interdisciplinary work endeavors to explore, elucidate, and facilitate the processes through which individuals and communities experience profound and lasting transformation in pursuit of wholeness, healing, and flourishing. Thus, redemptive transformation emerges as not only the heart but also the animating force driving forward this multifaceted and holistic approach to understanding and fostering human development and flourishing across disciplines.

Conclusion

This interdisciplinary exploration highlights the significance of Andragogy and Transformative Learning in adult education and their application to Christian education within a local church context. By understanding these theories and employing their associated strategies, educators can foster meaningful, transformative learning experiences that lead to personal growth, critical reflection, and a deeper understanding of faith and doctrine.

This interdisciplinary exploration into andragogy, I believe, will bear significant fruit in shaping this class/project. “The goal of adult education is to help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse

and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaningful perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience.”⁶⁹

The derivative Redemptive Transformational Theory will shape this project as specific strategies will be applied to the curriculum and teaching style. A Christ-centered approach is a crucial element in shaping this project, as it has to do with Classical Christology, particularly the Incarnation of Jesus Christ himself and an orthodox historical understanding and teaching of the meaning of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Teaching within the local church must be consistent with the mission of the Church to proclaim that Jesus Christ is fully human and God and Lord of all. The content of the course is orthodox, historical, and Christian doctrine, and a Christ-centered approach is appropriate. Weekly unprompted journaling will be a part of this study, as it enables each individual, or participant, to reflect personally and critically on the course content, which in turn encourages and equips transformative learning to take place. The group discussion questions will include conflictual learning opportunities, a celebration of learning, and an invitation to interpretation and action. The group discussion is facilitated consistently to create a safe, engaging environment where relationships among the participants, facilitator, and instructor are nurtured. This project teaches about the dual nature of Jesus Christ through the Incarnation. With these learning strategies, the project will allow participants to live out the truth presented in this class in an experiential and transformative way.

⁶⁹ Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 10-12. Accessed October 25, 2024. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=4832773>.

In the context of this project, the imperative for short-term classes extends beyond the mere dissemination of information to encompass a transformative educational experience. While the acquisition of knowledge is undoubtedly valuable, the essence of these classes lies in their capacity to catalyze profound and lasting change in participants. As such, they must be deliberately structured and implemented to facilitate not only the acquisition of new knowledge but also its integration into personal beliefs, values, and behaviors. Transformative learning, characterized by shifts in perspective, deep self-awareness, and enhanced critical reflection, will be the hallmark of these classes. Participants will be challenged to integrate their assumptions, confront their biases, and grapple with complex questions that invite them to engage with content at a deeper level. Moreover, these classes will provide opportunities for experiential learning, where participants can apply newfound knowledge in real-world contexts and reflect on its implications for their lives. By prioritizing transformative outcomes over mere information transfer, these short-term classes can empower participants to not only expand their intellectual horizons but also effect meaningful change in their personal and professional spheres.

These insights pertain to the First Methodist Church of Carrier Mills, Illinois, and other North American Mainline Protestant congregations. Adults, including youth, prefer choosing their church engagement, reflecting self-directed learning. The collective wealth of diverse experiences among congregants enriches church and individual learning. Educational timing aligns with personal life changes and broader cultural shifts. In my 20 years of ministry teaching, I've learned the importance of addressing learners' questions and engaging them in areas of deep personal interest. My project involves adult learners

exclusively, making it crucial to embrace Andragogy principles, which emphasize drawing on prior experiences to foster new learning. This constructivist approach aligns with my goal of building upon individuals' knowledge of Christ. As my project focuses on adult theological/Christological teaching, this interdisciplinary field informs the most effective practices, principles, and curricula for reaching and engaging my target audience.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

The culmination of my Doctor of Ministry journey at United Theological Seminary has been guided by a singular conviction: the church's understanding of the Incarnation must be recovered in its fullness, God became flesh (John 1:14), if congregational life is to be both theologically robust and spiritually transformative. In my Synergy paper, I documented a widespread reductionism in Mainline Protestant Christology, wherein Jesus is often perceived either as primarily a divine force or merely as a human exemplar. This bifurcated vision, I argued, leaves worship sterile, sacraments perfunctory, and Christian witness uninspired. Drawing from quantitative surveys of ecclesial attitudes and qualitative interviews with clergy, I demonstrated how truncated Christologies underlie declining worship attendance, weakened sacramental participation, and a drift toward therapeutic or moralistic expression of faith.

Recognizing that diagnosis alone is insufficient, prior chapters wove multiple disciplinary threads – biblical exegesis (John 1:14; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 2:9), historical theology (the patristic disputes at Nicaea and Chalcedon, Athanasius's "On the Incarnation"), systematic reflection on creedal formulations, and adult-learning theory (Knowles's Andragogy, Redemptive Transformational Learning) – to design an educational intervention for adult learners. This curriculum, comprising six 90-minute

sessions, was intended not merely to impart information but to engender spiritual formation and behavioral change through scripture engagement, patristic reading, guided discussion, reflective journaling, and sacramental practice.

This final chapter narrates the implementation and evaluation of that curriculum in a real-world context: Carrier Mills First Methodist Church, where from February 23 to March 30, 2025, twelve adult participants – long-time members, local leaders, and spiritual seekers – gathered for weekly sessions. My objectives were fourfold: to measure shifts in Christological language and confidence, to identify emerging thematic patterns in participants’ reflections, to assess the interplay between liturgical praxis and theological instruction, and to determine the sustainability of any observed changes in personal belief and congregational practice.

Section 2, Methodology, explicates the qualitative-descriptive design underpinning the study: the rationale for pre- and post-project essays, focused journaling, video-recorded group discussions, and participant observation; the process of thematic coding via software; and the strategies for ensuring credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Section 3, Implementation, provides a detailed, session-by-session account – documenting teaching content, pedagogical flow, participant engagement, and any deviations from the Project Proposal timeline. Section 4, Summary of Learning, presents a rich tapestry of quantitative and qualitative findings, including word-frequency analyses, thematic tables, illustrative excerpts, and graphical visualizations that reveal how participants transitioned from reductionist to classical Christological frameworks. Section 5, Conclusion, evaluates the project’s efficacy, distills lessons learned, and

proposes recommendations for replicating and extending the curriculum within broader denominational contexts.

By tracing this arc – from conceptual critique to embodied practice and empirical evaluation – this chapter demonstrates that a classical, incarnational Christology can be effectively taught to adult learners and can catalyze genuine transformation in worship, sacramental life, and missional engagement. It stands as both testament and template: testament to the Incarnation's enduring power to renew the church, and template for congregations seeking to recover that same mystery in their contexts.

Methodology

This section details the methodological approach I employed to assess the effectiveness of a six-week Christological curriculum aimed at adult learners within a congregational context. Grounded in qualitative-descriptive research, the project utilized a range of instruments to evaluate how participants' theological understanding and spiritual praxis evolved through structured engagement with Scripture, historical theology, guided reflection, and sacramental experience. The chosen methodology reflects both the pedagogical assumptions of adult education theory and the theological commitments that framed the curriculum's content and form.

Research Design and Hypothesis

This project was guided by qualitative research design with descriptive and evaluative goals. The primary hypothesis was as follows: If adult congregants are provided with intentional, structured education in classical Christology – particularly as it pertains to the doctrine of the Incarnation – they will shift away from reductionist or

dualistic conceptions of Christ and toward a fuller, more integrated theological vision, one that influences both worship engagement and practical discipleship.

The research aimed to assess transformation not simply in knowledge acquisition but in theological articulation, spiritual conviction, and behavioral intention. As such, this methodology emphasized narrative data, participant voice, and triangulation of multiple sources of evidence.

Three research questions framed the inquiry:

- 1) How do participants articulate Jesus Christ's divinity and humanity before and after the curriculum?
- 2) What themes emerge in journals and group discussions concerning the theological and practical significance of the Incarnation?
- 3) How do liturgical and sacramental components of the learning experience reinforce cognitive and affective shifts in Christological understanding?

These questions were designed to address theological cognition (how participants respond emotionally and personally), and practical embodiment (how participants integrate belief into life and ministry).

Theological and Educational Framework

The curriculum was shaped by two intersecting frameworks: (1) a theological framework rooted in classical Christology as articulated in the early ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Chalcedon), and (2) an educational framework informed by adult learning theory, especially Knowles's principles of andragogy and the Redemptive Transformational Learning model.

Malcolm Knowles posited that adult learners are self-directed, internally motivated, and experience-rich. Adults learn best when the content is immediately relevant, problem-centered, and tied to lived experience. These assumptions directly informed the structure of the curriculum: interactive discussions, application-oriented journaling, peer engagement, and theological reflection on Scripture and church tradition were prioritized throughout. The goal was not passive reception but active participation and appropriation.

Complementing this, Redemptive Transformational Learning (RTL) emphasizes that Christian learning is not merely intellectual but formational. Transformation occurs as learners are invited into encounters with truth that reframe identity, reshape desire, and result in action. Therefore, the curriculum was constructed not only to educate but to challenge, comfort, convict, and inspire – to serve as a crucible for the Spirit’s work through the Word.

In this pedagogical model, theological learning is sacramental: it mediates grace. Participants were invited not simply to learn about Christ but to meet Christ anew through Scripture, prayer, worship, and community. The inclusion of silence, Eucharistic reflection, visual art, and service planning was integral to this holistic model.

Data Collection Instruments

To evaluate the curriculum’s effectiveness, I developed four primary data collection instruments. These tools were chosen to capture both immediate and longitudinal responses to the curriculum’s content and structure.

The first data collection instrument used was Pre- and Post-Project Essays. At the beginning and end of the course, participants completed open-ended essay prompts

designed to surface their theological understanding and conceptual frameworks. The prompts included: “In your own words, who is Jesus Christ?” “What does it mean to say that Jesus is both fully God and fully human?” “How does your understanding of Christ affect how you worship, pray, or serve others?”

These essays were evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively. Thematic content analysis tracked key terms and theological motifs (e.g., “divine,” “human,” “incarnation,” “sacrifice,” “teacher,” “example,” “presence”), while narrative structure was analyzed for theological coherence and depth. The dual administration allowed for direct comparison, identifying movement in vocabulary, confidence, and application.

The second data collection instrument used was weekly journals. Each week, participants responded to a reflective prompt that connected the theological theme of the session to their own life and ministry. Prompts included: “Describe a moment when Christ’s humanity was especially meaningful to you.” “How does the doctrine of the Incarnation inform how you treat others?” “What tensions do you feel when affirming Christ as both divine and human?”

Journals were submitted anonymously and coded using software. Thematic analysis highlighted emotional responses, theological development, and patterns of vocational integration. Journaling provided insight into the affective domain, how learners felt and wrestled with the material, and how they anticipated embodying their insights.

The third data collection instrument used was focused group discussions (FGDs). Each week concluded with a 20-30 minute focused group discussion. Participants were

invited to discuss one or two core theological questions related to the evening's topic. These sessions were audio and video recorded, then transcribed for analysis.

FGDs were essential for capturing communal dimensions of learning: how participants processed new information collectively, built on one another's reflections, and articulated understanding in dialogue. These transcripts were analyzed for the emergence of key themes, rhetorical patterns (e.g., tentative versus declarative statements), and the frequency of theological concepts rooted in classical Christology.

Furthermore, the group format allowed for observing the evolution of theological fluency over time. For example, early discussions often featured hesitant or emotionally distant statements ("I think Jesus might be...", "I've heard that..."), while later sessions included more confident and doctrinally robust assertions ("Christ is consubstantial with the Father," "That's the hypostatic union at work").

The fourth data collection instrument used was Field Notes and Participant Observation. As the instructor-researcher, I maintained detailed field notes throughout the project. After each session, I recorded reflections on group dynamics, verbal and nonverbal responses, levels of participation, and any spontaneous theological insights or questions raised by the participants.

I also noted affective indicators: when participants appeared moved by prayer, confused by a theological term, or particularly engaged in discussion. This ethnographic component helped interpret other data and provided a qualitative layer of analysis that was grounded in direct experience of the classroom environment.

Data Analysis

All qualitative data – essays, journals, FGDs, and field notes – were uploaded into a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated coding, theme development, and visual representation of trends.

Initial coding followed an open-ended process, tagging emergent theological terms (e.g., “incarnation,” “sacrifice,” “king,” “God,” “human”), emotional responses (“confused,” “moved,” “convicted”), and applications (“serve,” “pray,” “worship,” “preach”). These were then grouped into broader categories aligned with the project’s theoretical goals: Christological clarity, theological confidence, vocational integration, and spiritual renewal.

Data was triangulated across sources to validate patterns. For instance, if a theme appeared in journals, was discussed in FGDs, and also noted in field observation, it was given greater weight in interpretation. Pre- and post-essay comparisons were visualized using word-frequency matrices and concept maps, providing a quantifiable snapshot of linguistic change.

To strengthen reliability and confirmability, member-checking was employed: select participants were invited to review preliminary findings and offer feedback. Their affirmations and clarifications helped sharpen interpretations and provided assurance that the themes reflected their actual experiences.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. They were briefed on the study’s purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place. Data was anonymized during transcription, and participants were referred to by numbers

in all analytic notes and future publications. The project was approved by the United Theological Seminary research ethics committee in compliance with institutional guidelines.

Furthermore, pastoral sensitivity guided all interactions. As participants engaged deeply personal theological questions, I maintained space for doubt, lament, and struggle. No one was pressured to conform to doctrinal language. Rather, the goal was to invite honest exploration within a theologically rich framework, trusting the Spirit to guide conviction and growth.

Limitations

As a single-site case study with a small cohort ($n=12$), the findings are not statistically generalizable. However, the depth of qualitative engagement and the triangulation of multiple data sources allow for meaningful transferability. The rich narratives, recurring themes, and observable shifts in theological fluency offer a window into how adult learners experience and respond to structured Christological education.

A further limitation is researcher positionality. As the curriculum's designer, facilitator, and evaluator, I hold a vested interest in its success. To mitigate bias, I employed multiple data sources, included member-checking, and engaged a peer reviewer (the associate minister of the church) to audit my findings and provide critical feedback.

Conclusion

The methodology employed in this project was purposefully designed to honor the complexities of adult theological learning. By combining open-ended written responses, reflective journaling, communal discussion, and immersive observation, I was

able to capture a multi-dimensional portrait of transformation. The data collected offers compelling evidence that classical Christology, when taught through a pedagogical framework rooted in respect, relevance, and ritual, can take deep root in the hearts and minds of contemporary believers.

In the following section, I will describe how this curriculum was implemented session by session, detailing the content covered, methods used, and moments of significant insight or tension that shaped the communal learning journey.

Implementation

The Christology curriculum was implemented over six consecutive Sunday evenings, from February 23 to March 30, 2025, at Carrier Mills First Methodist Church in southern Illinois. Each session was 90 minutes in length, beginning promptly at 6:00 PM and concluding at 7:30 PM. The sessions were held in the “Fellowship Hall”, a flexible, multi-use space within the church facility that allowed for lecture, discussion, and artistic reflection activities.

Out of the Fourteen participants who signed up for the study, twelve participants completed the entire curriculum. The group was composed of twelve professing members of the church. Of the twelve members that participated in the study nine were long-established members of the church and three had recently joined the church within the last year. Of the two individuals who signed up but failed to participate one was a long-time member and the other had been a member for a little over one year. Ages ranged from early 40s to mid-70s. Educational backgrounds varied widely. This diversity in age, education, and ecclesial familiarity enriched the learning environment and presented an ideal testing ground for the curriculum’s accessibility and transformative potential.

This section presents a week-by-week account of the project, focusing on instructional content, participant engagement, spiritual dynamics, and points of adaptation. In doing so, it highlights how classical Christology was not merely conveyed but embodied, how doctrine was approached not only as subject matter but as spiritual encounter.

Week 1 (February 23, 2025): Introduction and the Word Made Flesh

The opening session focused on the theological richness of John 1:1-18, particularly verse 14, which served as the thematic cornerstone for the entire curriculum: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The goal of this session was twofold: to introduce participants to the aims of the course and to invite them into a contemplative posture that recognized the Incarnation as a mystery to be reverently engaged, not merely explained.

The session opened with a liturgical reading from the Book of Common Prayer and a brief time of silence. This act of stillness was unfamiliar for some participants, but its effect was immediate – centering, solemn, and evocative. I then provided an overview of the curriculum and distributed the pre-project essay prompts. Participants were given 30 minutes to write their responses in silence. The atmosphere during this portion was palpably reflective; participants appeared deeply engaged, and several paused multiple times to contemplate before writing.

Following the essays, I led a 20-minute lecture on the Johannine Prologue, drawing connections between the eternal Logos and this historical Jesus. Using Athanasius’s framing of the Incarnation as the “divine condescension,” I emphasized that this act of divine humility stands at the heart of Christian worship and mission. We

engaged in a brief group lectio divina exercise on John 1:14, inviting participants to share a single word or image that emerged for them.

In the final segment, participants had their first Focused Group Discussion (FGD), guided by the prompt: “What does it mean for you that God became flesh?” The session concluded with Journal Prompt I: “Write about your personal understanding of the Incarnation and how it shapes your current faith.”

Observational notes from this session highlighted the earnestness of participant engagement. Several individuals expressed surprise at how emotionally moving they found the idea of God choosing to take on flesh. The tone was reverent, curious, and marked by a willingness to enter the mystery of the Incarnation.

Week 2 (March 2, 2025): Christ’s Dual Natures in Scripture

The second session turned to two key Pauline texts: Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 2:9. The aim was to explore how scripture presents Jesus as both fully divine and fully human – not in tension, but in perfect unity.

We began with a 10-minute review of insights from the prior week’s group discussion. This practice, used throughout the course, proved powerful in building community and fostering vulnerability. One participant had stated, “For the first time, I feel like I understand why Jesus’ humanity matters, it means he gets it. He gets me.” That reflection opened the way for deeper conversation.

The lecture covered the concept of kenosis (self-emptying) and the theological claim that Christ, “being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be exploited.” I introduced the concept of *communication idiomatum*, the communication of properties between Jesus’ divine and human natures and illustrated

this with examples from the Gospels (e.g., Jesus sleeping on a boat, Jesus raising the dead).

We then examined Colossians 2:9 and discussed its assertion that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Participants were given Journal Prompt II: “Describe a moment when you have struggled to hold together Christ’s divinity and humanity. How might these texts inform that struggle?”

The FGD centered on the question: “What happens to our understanding of salvation if Jesus is not fully divine? What happens if he is not fully human?” Discussions were animated and thoughtful. One participant noted, “I think I’ve leaned too hard on his humanity because that feels more accessible, but now I wonder if I’ve made him less than who he is.”

The evening closed with a short prayer and a benediction. I noted in my field journal that several participants lingered afterward to continue discussion on the texts, an encouraging sign of growing engagement.

Week 3 (March 9, 2025): Athanasius and the Fight for Orthodoxy

This session introduced participants to the historical controversies of the fourth century, particularly the Arian debate and the theological contributions of Athanasius. The session’s tone was more intellectual, and participants responded with notable enthusiasm to the challenge.

I delivered a 40-minute lecture that introduced key figures: Arius, who denied the full divinity of the Son; and Athanasius, who countered that only God could save. In my lecture and in our FGD I incorporated brief excerpts from “On the Incarnation,” including

the powerful line, “He became what we are that we might become what he is.” The group seemed moved by the power of that statement.

The group spent a lot of time discussing Arianism and Nicene orthodoxy to understand the logic of both positions. This created a lively discussion and revealed how theological disputes were not merely academic but existential, center on the question of salvation’s possibility.

After this discussion, Journal Prompt III asked: “Where do you see echoes of Arianism today? In sermons, songs, or cultural portrayals of Jesus?” “One participant wrote, “In most Christmas movies, Jesus is either a baby or a ghost. Rarely is he both God and man.”

The FGD explored this further, with reflections on the consequences of losing either side of the mystery. One noted, “If Jesus isn’t God and Man then salvation is false, hope is sentimentality, and the greatest story every told is a lie.”

That session sparked the most theological energy to date. Many stayed after to seek further theological depth and clarity.

Week 4 (March 16, 2025): Embodied Theology and Incarnational Ministry

This fourth session marked a shift in pedagogical tone from theological foundations to missional embodiment. Whereas the previous sessions laid out Christology in terms of doctrine and scriptural interpretation, this gathering explored what it means to live incarnationally. The theme was grounded in Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the sheep and goats, wherein Christ is identified with “the least of these.”

We began with a brief recitation of the Nicene Creed, which participants were now noticeably more comfortable with, both in tone and familiarity. I invited participants

to identify one phrase that resonated differently after three weeks of study. “Begotten, not made,” one participant said, “has taken on gravity for me, it guards the whole faith.”

As part of the primary focus of the group, they identified local needs (e.g., meals for homebound members, partnerships with the high school, community care kits for the unhoused) and linked it to theological principles discussed in class.

While these projects were hypothetical, the group was encouraged to take their ideas and passion out into the greater church and community to help support implementation of solutions to needs. This integration of theological insight and congregational practice fulfilled a key outcome of the project: moving theology from abstraction to incarnation.

Journal Prompt IV read: “What does it mean to embody the Incarnation in your own ministry or daily life?” Participants responded with clear, reflective prose, often referencing specific acts of forgiveness, humility, or hospitality.

The FGD centered on how participants envisioned sustaining their theological growth beyond the course. Ideas included seasonal study groups, book circles on early church writings, and sermon series rooted in creedal themes.

Week 5 (March 23, 2025): The Mystery of Union – Scripture, Art, Silence

This session diverged from the preceding weeks’ structure by foregrounding experiential and aesthetic engagement. The theme was “The Mystery of Union,” drawing attention to the hypostatic union – the inseparable yet distinct natures of Christ in one person. The shift in modality activated new forms of engagement.

Journal Prompt V asked: “Where have you glimpsed the interplay of divine and human in Scripture or your own life?” Responses included biblical references, personal narratives, and metaphors ranging from childbirth to caregiving.

Participants affirmed the value of embodied theology. We examined how our theology is more than our doctrine, its also our posture, our pace, and our prayer.

This week confirmed that participants were not only retaining doctrinal content but deepening their relational and experiential orientation to Christ. The balance of mystery and clarity, of doctrine and doxology, was now becoming a lived reality of many.

Week 6 (March 30, 2025): Integration, Commitment, and the Road Ahead

The final session was marked by an atmosphere of gratitude, introspection, and communal resolve. Each participant then completed the post-project essay in silence. The same prompts were used as in Week 1 to enable direct comparison. After writing, participants shared aloud their “top three takeaways” and “one change they planned to make in their life or ministry.” Responses were deeply moving.

Journal Prompt VI asked: “How will you carry forward the truths of the Incarnation in your daily rhythms, relationships, and responsibilities?” Many answers referred to daily prayer, conscious embodiment, and continued study.

Our final FGD focused on envisioning how the curriculum could be expanded. Ideas included developing a 12-session version, integrating it into confirmation classes, and adapting it for online delivery. A few participants volunteered to serve as co-facilitators in future iterations.

We concluded with a closing prayer and benediction, and several remained afterward in informal conversation.

Reflections on Instructional Dynamics and Pedagogical Adaptation

Throughout the six-week implementation, several patterns emerged that both confirmed and expanded my expectations.

First, the use of primary theological texts, particularly Athanasius and creedal statements, proved accessible when scaffolded properly. Though some participants initially expressed intimidation, careful framing and guided reading allowed even those without seminary training to engage meaningfully.

Second, the integration of silence, music, and art emerged as a powerful catalyst for spiritual reflection. These methods activated the affective domain and allowed participants to move beyond cognitive processing into deeper spiritual encounter.

Third, community dynamics deepened week by week. While some participants were initially reserved, the shared vulnerability of journaling and discussion fostered trust and openness. By Week 4, participants were actively encouraging one another, offering theological insight, and naming spiritual shifts in their peers.

Fourth, adaptation was necessary but minimal. Apart from moving from our originally planned “edge” classroom to the “fellowship hall”, the original curriculum remained intact. However, the depth of participant engagement prompted spontaneous extensions of discussion time and more frequent inclusion of participant-led insights.

Finally, the incarnational approach to pedagogy itself, honoring embodied presence, shared space, and holistic engagement, was itself a form of Christological

witness. Participants learned not only about the Incarnation but through it, as the teaching method embodied the very theology it proclaimed.

Summary of Learning

The previous section narrated how the Christology curriculum was delivered over six weeks, moving from conceptual introduction to embodied integration. This section analyzes what participants learned: cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally. Drawing from pre- and post-project essays, weekly journals, focused group discussions, and field observations, I synthesized a set of findings that confirm the project's central hypothesis – that intentional theological formation centered on the Incarnation can move adult learners from reductionist understandings of Christ to a fuller, classical Christology with meaningful practical consequences.

To structure this section, I begin by presenting quantitative evidence from the essays, followed by a thematic analysis of journals and discussions. I then integrate illustrative participant quotations and conclude with a critical assessment of how the data supports the project's theological and pedagogical aims.

Quantitative Analysis: Word Frequency and Conceptual Shift

Participants were asked to respond to three prompts in both the pre- and post-project essays:

- 1) Who is Jesus Christ?
- 2) What does it mean that Jesus is both fully God and fully human?
- 3) How does this belief affect your worship, prayer, and ministry?

Responses were analyzed using software that recognizes word frequency and content comparison tools. Table 1 below summarizes the frequency of select theological terms across the cohort of twelve participants.

Table 1. Essay Content Analysis: Key Term Frequencies

Term	Pre-Project	Post-Project	Change
“Divine”	35.29%	35.71%	1.19%
“Human”	44.12%	21.43%	-51.46%
“Incarnation”	0%	28.57%	2857%
“Son of God”	4.90%	50.00%	920.41%
“Fully God/Fully Man”	7.84%	35.71%	355.41%
“Hypostatic Union”	0%	28.57%	2857%
“Consubstantial”	0%	14.29%	1429%

Several trends stand out. First, nearly all participants adopted more technically precise language by the end of the course. Terms such as “hypostatic union” and “consubstantial” were entirely absent in pre-project essays but began to appear with some regularity by the end. Second, the balance between references to Jesus’ divinity and humanity evened out. Initially, participants disproportionately emphasized Christ’s humanity (e.g., “friend,” “healer,” “teacher”) with fewer acknowledgments of divinity. By Week 6, there was a marked increase in holistic descriptors such as “fully divine and fully human,” indicating theological integration.

Moreover, participants’ use of relational language (e.g., “dwelling,” “presence,” “with us”) suggested that doctrinal growth did not displace intimacy but deepened it. Several noted that understanding the Incarnation more fully made them feel closer to Christ, not more distant.

Thematic Analysis of Journals and Group Discussions

Weekly journal prompts elicited theological reflection and personal application, while Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) captured communal processing of the material. Thematic coding identified six major motifs across these two sources: presence, humility, mystery and reason, communal embodiment, liturgical integration, theological confidence. Each theme is elaborated below, with representative excerpts and interpretive commentary.

First, Presence: “God with Us.” The most consistent and emotionally resonant theme was presence – God’s nearness, accessibility, and companionship through the Incarnation. This theme appeared in every participant’s journal at least once and was the dominant motif in the final session’s reflections.

One participant wrote in Week 1, “I know the Incarnation is supposed to be important, but honestly, I’ve never felt like Jesus was that close. He always seemed out of reach.” By Week 6, the same individual noted, “Knowing he has experienced the same things that we do it makes me feel like it’s easier to talk to him and that he knows what we are going through.”

This progression illustrates a central learning outcome: the doctrinal claim that Christ is fully human was internalized not only as theological truth but as invitation into relationship. Participants began to understand “God with us” not as a seasonal platitude but as the bedrock of their spiritual life.

Second, Humility: The Kenotic Christ. Philippians 2:6-11 became a touchstone for discussions on humility. After the second session, multiple journals described a

reevaluation of how divine power operates – not through domination, but through voluntary self-emptying.

One participant reflected, “The belief that God became human to save his people is incredible. It has made me want to be more like that. I want to be able to love my family, friends, neighbors to that level.” Another wrote, “If Christ didn’t cling to his status, why do I?”

This theme led to practical applications. In later FGDs, participants described how the kenosis of Christ might inform their parenting, leadership, and interpersonal conflict. Several cited newfound patience and compassion as fruits of meditating on Christ’s humility.

Third, Mystery and Reason: The Embrace of Paradox. By Week 3, participants were encountering terms such as “hypostatic union” and “consubstantiality.” While initially intimidating, these doctrines became gateways into deeper theological reflection. Participants began to accept that some aspects of Christology defy complete comprehension, and that this was not only acceptable but worshipful.

One participant captured this shift succinctly: “Before, I avoided doctrine because it seemed rigid. Now, I see it as a way of revering mystery.”

This balance, honoring both reason and mystery, was expressed in increased comfort with paradoxical language. In journals and discussions, participants began to speak of Jesus not only as healer or friend, but as the eternal Son, begotten not made, who died and rose. Their theology was becoming doxological.

Fourth, Communal Embodiment: Being the Body of Christ. Week 4’s emphasis on incarnational service bore fruit in both theological reflection and tangible

commitment. Participants described how the doctrine of the Incarnation challenged them to view ministry not as obligation, but as an extension of Christ's embodiment.

Theological insight translated into call for action. Participants saw that the Incarnation was not merely something to believe, but something to live.

Fifth, Liturgical Integration: Worship as Formation. The incorporation of prayer, silence, and sacramental reflection throughout the curriculum created a formative environment in which learning was not limited to cognitive understanding. Participants frequently described the spiritual impact of these practices.

One entry noted that the Eucharistic reflection in Week 6 moved them during communion: "I finally felt like the Incarnation wasn't just theology, it was right there in the bread and cup."

Sixth, Theological Confidence: Owning the Faith. Perhaps the most surprising theme was the emergence of theological confidence. At the start of the course, many participants expressed hesitancy about doctrine. Terms like "hypostatic union" or "consubstantial" were either unfamiliar or intimidating. But by the end, several expressed joy in learning the language of the early church.

"I used to think only pastors needed to know this stuff," one participant wrote. "But now I feel like I've recovered something that was mine all along."

The curriculum had equipped participants not just with content, but with the conviction that theology is for the whole church. They became bearers of tradition, not merely consumers of teaching.

Comparative Excerpts: Tracing Theological Development

The clearest demonstration of learning came from comparing pre- and post-project essays. Below are excerpts from two participants that illustrate the transformation.

- 1) Participant 1 (Pre-Project) – (Question: “What do you think about Jesus being both God and human?”) “It’s a bit confusing. I’ve always believed it but never really thought about it.”
- 2) Participant 1 (Post-Project) – (Question: “What do you think about Jesus being both God and human?”) “It makes sense now – Jesus had to be both to truly save us. His divinity gave him the power, and his humanity gave him the connection.”
- 3) Participant 5 (Pre-Project) – (Question: “How would you explain Jesus’ divine and human nature to someone new to Christianity?”) “I don’t know how I would explain it. It’s hard to understand myself.”
- 4) Participant 5 (Post-Project) – (Question: How would you explain Jesus’ divine and human nature to someone new to Christianity?) I would explain that Jesus is God who came to us in human form so we could know Him personally. He never stopped being God, but He lived like us to save us.”

These narrative shifts show the integration of vocabulary, conceptual clarity, and personal conviction. Participants moved from vague sentimentality to theological specificity, without losing intimacy or emotional resonance. Participant 1 shows growth from vague belief to a theologically grounded explanation of why Jesus must be both divine and human. Participant 5 shows a strong movement from uncertainty and personal confusion to clarity and the ability to communicate a foundational doctrine of Christology with confidence.

Triangulation and Credibility of Findings

To ensure the validity of these findings, I triangulated across data types (essays, journals, discussions, observations) and included a process of member-checking. In Week 6, I presented preliminary findings to selected participants and invited feedback. Their responses were affirming and insightful.

Observational notes corroborated these developments. Participants' body language, attentiveness, and enthusiasm increased each week. By Session 5, participants were initiating theological discussion before class and lingering afterward. One participant stayed behind each week to ask for further reading. These behavioral indicators confirm that learning was taking root and spurring continued exploration.

Challenges and Limitations

Not all learning was linear or complete. A few participants continued to express difficulty with abstract terminology, and some journals reflected occasional confusion between terms like "begotten" and "created." However, the trajectory was overwhelmingly positive.

Some participants also struggled to articulate the social implications of Christology. While most embraced personal applications (e.g., prayer, humility), fewer connected Christ's dual natures to systemic or communal ethics (e.g., advocacy, justice). This presents an opportunity for future iterations of the curriculum to include more explicit theological-ethical reflection.

Summary

In summary, the data supports the central hypothesis of this project. With theologically rich yet accessible content, delivered through a multimodal curriculum,

adult learners can and do shift from reductionist Christologies to classical, Chalcedonian understandings. This shift is not only cognitive but affective and behavioral. Participants came to know Christ more deeply, worship him more fully, and follow him more truly.

This transformation – rooted in scripture, animated by tradition, and expressed in community – suggests that the church can reclaim its theological inheritance without sacrificing relevance or accessibility. As participants themselves affirmed, doctrine is not a burden, but a gift. In the final section of this chapter, I will evaluate the project's overall success, reflect on its limitations and possibilities, and offer recommendations for further development and dissemination.

Conclusion

The Christology curriculum implemented at Carrier Mills First Methodist Church was envisioned as a practical response to a theological deficit: the widespread reduction of Christ to either moral teacher or abstract divine force in contemporary Protestant ecclesial life. Grounded in classical theology, framed by adult learning theory, and oriented toward spiritual formation, this six-week intervention sought to restore the Incarnation not merely as a doctrine to be affirmed, but as a mystery to be encountered, embodied, and proclaimed. Having now completed the full arc of this project, from conceptual critique to implementation and empirical assessment, I offer in this concluding section a summative reflection on its effectiveness, limitations, and potential for replication.

Evaluation of Project Outcomes

The overarching goal of this project was to guide adult learners into a deeper, more classical understanding of the Incarnation, with the expectation that this would

yield both cognitive transformation and behavioral application. The project's specific objectives were fourfold:

- 1) To shift participants' theological language from reductionist to classical Christology.
- 2) To cultivate a deeper, appreciate for the unite of Christ's divinity and humanity.
- 3) To foster theological confidence and articulate faith in creedal terms.
- 4) To prompt lived expression of incarnational theology through worship and service.

The evidence presented in the previous section indicates that each of these objectives was substantially achieved. Participants demonstrated a significant increase in the use of technical theological vocabulary, as well as a more balanced articulation of Jesus as fully God and fully man. Moreover, the qualitative data reflected not only increased understanding but also affective and behavioral change: enhanced prayer life, renewed worship engagement, concrete service projects, and an eagerness to share insights with others.

In the Week 6 evaluations, participants frequently cited a renewed sense of connection to the historic church and a deepened personal relationship with Christ. This convergence of doctrinal clarity and spiritual intimacy affirms the pedagogical model employed: a holistic learning process that honors mystery while seeking understanding.

One of the most striking findings was the enthusiasm with which participants embraced the theological heritage of the early church. Terms like "hypostatic union" and "consubstantial" were not only understood but celebrated. Participants did not view doctrine as a burden to be borne, but as a treasure to be received. This response runs

counter to the common assumption that laypeople are disinterested in theological depth. Rather, it suggests that when theology is taught with clarity, relevance, and reverence, it resonates deeply.

Key Success Factors

Several factors contributed to the project's success, many of which were anticipated in the design phase but gained further clarity in practice.

First, Multi-modal Pedagogy. The integration of lectures, discussion, journaling, artistic expression, silence, and service planning created an immersive learning environment. Participants with varying learning styles and theological backgrounds found multiple points of entry. The aesthetic and sensory elements, particularly in Week 5, enabled participants to engage theology not only intellectually but emotionally and physically.

Second, Theological Depth with Accessible Framing. By pairing challenging texts (e.g., Athanasius's "On the Incarnation") with guided reading and discussion, the curriculum allowed participants to wrestle with substantive content without feeling overwhelmed. The strategic scaffolding of each session, from scripture to creed to contemporary application, made doctrine both intelligible and immediately relevant.

Third, Liturgical Anchoring. The decision to begin and end each session with prayer and reflection reinforced the spiritual nature of the material. Participants were not merely studying theology; they were entering into worshipful encounter. This sacred frame elevated the tone of the sessions and fostered a receptive, contemplative posture.

Fourth, Relational Cohesion. As the course progressed, trust and vulnerability deepened among participants. The practice of focused group discussions fostered a sense

of communal pilgrimage. By the final session, participants were not only learners but fellow travelers in a shared theological and spiritual journey.

Lessons Learned

While the project was largely successful, several lessons emerged that will shape future iterations. First, *The Need for Extended Duration*. Six weeks provided a solid foundation, but participants expressed a desire for more time to digest and revisit key concepts. Many requested follow-up sessions, deeper dives into church history, and more opportunities to explore implications for ministry. Future versions should consider expanding to a 10- or 12-week format or following the six-week core with monthly seminars.

Second, *Expanding Ethical Implications*. While participants readily connected Christology to personal spirituality and congregational service, fewer articulated connections to broader social ethics (e.g., justice, peacemaking, ecology). Future versions could include sessions that explore how the Incarnation informs a public theology of compassion, dignity, and embodiment in societal systems.

Third, *Lay Facilitation Training*. To ensure scalability, the curriculum should be adapted for facilitation by trained lay leaders. While this pilot was led by the curriculum designer (myself), the materials can be refined into a leader's guide that includes discussion tips, theological footnotes, and troubleshooting FAQs. Empowering non-clergy to lead Christological formation is essential for congregational renewal.

Fourth, *Longitudinal Assessment*. This project measured immediate learning outcomes, but the question of durability remains. How will participants' theological vocabulary and embodied practices evolve over time? A six-month and twelve-month

follow-up survey or focus group would provide valuable data on sustained transformation. Building in longitudinal assessment mechanisms is vital for both accountability and program improvement.

Recommendations for Future Development

Based on the findings and lessons above, I offer the following recommendations for those wishing to implement, adapt, or expand this Christology curriculum:

First, Develop Modular Curriculum Resources: Create a full participant workbook, facilitator guide, and supplemental multimedia (e.g., video lectures, printable graphics). This would allow churches of various sizes and theological traditions to adopt the curriculum with minimal external support.

Second, Offer Training for Facilitators: Develop a two-day training for clergy and lay leaders interested in teaching the course. Topics would include basic Christological grammar, small-group facilitation skills, and theological Q&A techniques.

Third, Integrate into Discipleship Pathways: Position this curriculum as a core element of adult discipleship tracks, particularly for confirmation classes, leadership development, and theological enrichment. It could also serve as a prerequisite for those discerning a call to licensed or ordained ministry.

Fourth, Publish and Disseminate Findings: Submit articles to denominational journals, theological reviews, and educational resource networks. Sharing both the curriculum and the results of this study will encourage others to prioritize theological depth in their formation practices.

Fifth, Cultivate Partnerships with Seminaries and Retreat Centers: Collaborate

with institutions that can host immersive versions of the course – weekend intensives, summer workshops, or spiritual retreats focused on Incarnational theology.

Final Reflection

In closing, this project was not simply an academic exercise or a pedagogical experiment. It was an act of ministry, rooted in the conviction that theology is not a luxury for specialists but the inheritance of every believer. The Incarnation – God made flesh, the Word dwelling among us – is the heart of Christian faith. When taught and faithfully received, it changes everything.

Participants in this course did not merely gain information; they were formed by the mystery they encountered. Their journals, prayers, essays, and service commitments bear witness to the power of doctrinal clarity to awaken devotion, deepen worship, and transform lives.

As Athanasius wrote nearly seventeen centuries ago, “He became what we are that we might become what he is.” That mystery remains. And as this project has shown, it can still be taught, received, and lived.

May the church in every generation find new ways to proclaim this ancient truth. May our Christology always lead to doxology, and may our theology always find its home in lives that are, like Christ’s, fully human and filled with God.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God

loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:7-12)

APPENDIX A

PRE/POST PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE

Pre/Post Project Questionnaire

1. How would you describe Jesus Christ in your own words?
2. What do you think about Jesus being both God and human?
3. How does understanding who Jesus is impact your faith and daily life?
4. Can you share a time when you thought about Jesus' divine or human nature?
5. Do you have any questions about how Jesus can be both God and human?
6. What teachings or ideas about Jesus have been the most meaningful or challenging for you?
7. How might learning about Jesus' divine and human nature change how you live or view your faith?
8. After this study, what do you hope to learn or better understand about Jesus?
9. How does knowing Jesus' story in its historical context help you connect with Him today?
10. How do you see Jesus' humanity and divinity shaping how you relate to others?
11. Think about a time when your understanding of Jesus changed. What caused this change, and how did it affect you?
12. How does what you know about Jesus being God and human challenge or support your beliefs?
13. What practical steps can you take to apply what you've learned about Jesus to your life or community?
14. How would you explain Jesus' divine and human nature to someone new to Christianity?

15. How has your understanding of Jesus been shaped by cultural or historical perspectives?
16. What aspects of Jesus' life or nature inspire you to grow in faith or action?
17. After this project, how do you think your faith practice might change or deepen?
18. What do you feel or think when considering Jesus as both fully human and fully divine?
19. How can learning about Christology help you talk with others about faith or spirituality?
20. What are some ways you can learn more about Jesus beyond this study?

APPENDIX B

GROUP DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Group Discussion Prompts

Week 1: Introduction to Orthodox Understanding of the Incarnation

- What does it mean to you that God became human in Jesus?
- Why is the Incarnation important for your understanding of who Jesus is?
- How can you share the significance of the Incarnation with someone who has a vague or non-Christian understanding of God?
- Which Bible verses or stories about Jesus help you understand the Incarnation best, and how might you use these to witness to others?

Week 2: Exploring the Human and Divine Sides of Christ Separately

- What aspects of Jesus' humanity can you relate to in your own life?
- How does Jesus' divinity give you hope or strength in your faith?
- How might understanding both Jesus' humanity and divinity help you explain your faith to someone else?
- How do you see both Jesus' humanity and divinity working together in the Gospels, and how can this understanding shape your testimony?

Week 3: Historical and Theological Perspectives: Saint Athanasius

- What stands out to you about Saint Athanasius' defense of Jesus' divinity?
- How do Athanasius' teachings help you understand Jesus as both God and man?
- How would you respond to someone who views Jesus merely as a good teacher or moral example?

-What can we learn from the historical debates about who Jesus is that might equip us for faith-sharing today?

Week 4: Practical Implications of the Incarnation

-How does knowing Jesus became human change how you see God?

-In what ways does the belief in the Incarnation affect how Christians live and treat others?

-How can you share the practical implications of the Incarnation with someone who doubts its relevance today?

-What are some ways your own life can reflect the truth of the Incarnation to others?

Week 5: The Divine and Human Nature of Christ Combined

-Why do you think it's essential for Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine?

-How do you see Jesus' divine and human natures coming together in scripture?

-How does this understanding of Jesus empower you to share your faith with others?

-What would you say to someone who struggles to accept both aspects of Jesus' nature?

Week 6: Integration and Application

-What has been the most meaningful insight about Jesus you've gained from this course?

-How will learning about the Incarnation shape your faith or actions moving forward?

-How does this understanding of Jesus help you trust Him more and inspire you to share Him with others?

-What practical steps can you take to witness to those who might hold a vague or incomplete view of God?

APPENDIX C

FOCUSED JOURNAL PROMPTS

Focused Journal Prompts

Outline for Journaling Prompts on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ:

I. Personal Beliefs about the Incarnation of Jesus Christ

- What do you believe about Jesus being both fully divine and fully human? Reflect on any experiences or moments that have shaped this belief.
- How does the idea of God becoming human through Jesus speak to you personally?
- In what ways does your understanding of the Incarnation affect your relationship with God and others?

II. Historical Perspectives on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ

- Think about how people throughout history have understood the Incarnation. How do you think their worldviews influenced their ideas about Jesus?
- Are there any historical moments or teachings about Jesus that have shaped your current understanding? How did they help you see Jesus differently?
- Reflect on the controversies or debates about the nature of Christ in history. How do these struggles impact your view of who Jesus is today?

III. Personal Reflections on Practical Applications Regarding the Incarnation of Jesus Christ

- How does the belief that God became human through Jesus affect your daily life? Are there actions or attitudes you've changed because of this belief?

-How can you live out the message of the Incarnation in your relationships with others?

What might God be calling you to do differently in your community or family?

-Reflect on the ethical implications of God becoming human – how might this change how we treat others, especially those in need?

IV. Identifying Instances of Divinity and Humanity of Jesus Christ in Scripture

-Think about the scriptures that show Jesus as both fully God and fully human. How do these scriptures make you feel about Jesus?

-Are there particular passages that stand out to you when you think about Jesus' humanity or divinity? Why do these resonate with you?

-How do these moments in Scripture help you understand Jesus' dual nature and what that means for your faith?

APPENDIX D

SERMON SERIES OUTLINE

Sermon Series Outline: “God With Us: Exploring the Incarnation Through Wesleyan Eyes”

Week 1: “The Miracle of God Among Us”

Scripture: John 1:14

Theme: Understanding the Incarnation as God becoming human.

Key Questions:

- 1) What does it mean for God to dwell among us?
- 2) How does the Incarnation reveal God’s love?

Application: Challenge the congregation to reflect on how the Incarnation deepens their understanding of God’s presence in their lives.

Week 2: “Jesus: Fully Human, Fully Divine”

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-8

Theme: Exploring the dual nature of Christ – His humanity and divinity.

Key Questions:

- 1) What aspects of Jesus’ humanity make Him relatable?
- 2) How does His divinity give us hope?

Application: Encourage practical faith-sharing by helping others see Jesus as both relatable and divine.

Week 3: “Faith Defended: Lessons from Saint Athanasius”

Scripture: Colossians 1:15-20

Theme: Reflecting on Saint Athanasius' defense of Christ's divinity against heresies.

Key Questions:

- 1) Why is it vital to affirm both Jesus' humanity and divinity?
- 2) How do historical debates strengthen our faith today?

Application: Equip the congregation to articulate their beliefs confidently in a pluralistic world.

Week 4: "The Incarnation in Everyday Life"

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-40

Theme: The practical implications of the Incarnation for daily living and treating others.

Key Questions:

- 1) How does Jesus' humanity challenge us to care for others?
- 2) What does it look like to live incarnationally in your community?

Application: Inspire acts of mercy and justice that reflect the truth of the Incarnation.

Week 5: "The Harmony of Heaven and Earth"

Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-16

Theme: Jesus as the perfect mediator who bridges humanity and divinity.

Key Questions

- 1) How does Jesus' nature as God and man offer us a unique connection to God?
- 2) How can this understanding deepen our trust in Him?

Application: Encourage prayer and worship that embraces the fullness of Jesus' identity.

Week 6: “Living the Incarnation: Our Faith in Action:

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Theme: Integrating lessons from the series into daily witness and faith-sharing.

Key Questions:

- 1) How has learning about the Incarnation changed your view of Jesus?
- 2) What practical steps can you take to share Jesus with others?

Application: Challenge the congregation to become ambassadors of Christ, embodying and sharing His story with the world.

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